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**'DOWDING SHOULD GO'. CHANGES IN
LEADERSHIP, STRATEGY AND TACTICS AT
FIGHTER COMMAND, JULY TO DECEMBER
1940, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE
BIG WING CONTROVERSY.**

FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

JOHN PHILIP RAY

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PREFACE

The origin of this thesis lay in an enigma. Why was it that in 1940, at the end of a momentous battle which they had both won, or, at least had not lost, the two chief air commanders on the British side were removed from their posts? Neither Air Chief-Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command, nor Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park, Air Officer Commanding, No.11 Group, ever forgave those they considered responsible for their dismissals. Since that period the question has remained largely unanswered. Here, an effort has been made to throw more light on a problem which still infuriates or disconcerts many of those involved in a battle which occurred over half a century ago.

For them, what exacerbates the argument is the later assessment of the importance of the struggle and the crucial part it played as a turning-point in the Second World War. Even at the arm's length of time, they reason, there should be a greater recognition of what the two commanders achieved and an admission that their treatment was less than generous. That was the starting point.

The thesis is based on three main sources. First are original documents of the time, Orders, Minute sheets, letters, notes, etc. Second, to gain a balanced view, a study has been made of the different interpretations offered in many books and lectures,

papers and letters written since, both by airmen who were in the battle and by historians. Third, meetings have been held to hear the recollections of former RAF personnel who were involved in action, whom it has been both rewarding and an honour to encounter.

Thanks are due to many who have helped the progress of the dissertation and who are mentioned later as sources of information. In particular, I should like to acknowledge the kindness of Squadron-Leader Bruce Ogilvie (No.601 Squadron) who knew Dowding well and who generously made available much material at the start of this study. Mr Sebastian Cox, of the Air Historical Branch of the RAF, and Air Marshal Sir Denis Crowley-Milling (No.242 Squadron) have done much to assist with shrewd assessment and thoughtful reminiscence respectively.

My tutors at the University of Kent, first Professor Richard Crampton, then Dr Julian Hurstfield, have offered wise and constructive critical advice in the gathering and presentation of the large amount of material gathered over several years. Thanks are also due to Mrs Tania Paddison who has typed the work with such care.

No one deserves greater praise than my wife. She has created circumstances which have allowed unfettered study and has accompanied me as a cheerful helper and scribe on many of the visits to glean information about a battle which we both saw and which is still refought when those involved meet.

Many people of my generation, and I upon starting this dissertation was not least among them, suffer from several pre-

conceived ideas about the Battle of Britain and the role of its various commanders. Having to exercise the rigours of historical discipline has caused me to alter a number of my opinions on both the battle and its participants, often marginally, occasionally radically. The result will, I hope, provide some new thinking and raise not a few questions on what some observers consider to have been not only the greatest air contest in History, but also Britain's most important battle during the Second World War.

Abstract

Between July and December 1940 three contests were fought in British skies. The first was a battle for aerial supremacy between the Luftwaffe and the RAF. The second was a struggle inside the Luftwaffe to plan and follow a coherent strategy of attack. Third was a controversy among senior RAF commanders over the tactics required for daylight defence. Until mid-September, the Luftwaffe attempted alone to defeat Britain first by overwhelming Fighter Command, then by heavy bombing. It failed, partly, by starting too late and waging an unprepared campaign with unsuitable equipment. Fighter Command, possessing the world's best aerial defensive system, fought a tenacious battle for which it had been designed, namely the protection of the Home Base. From mid-September the Luftwaffe changed largely to night bombing, confronting Britain with an offensive more difficult to counter. For some months the RAF, lacking a suitable night fighter, appeared impotent in defence. This weakness was a catalyst for reservations felt by the Air Council over the leadership, strategy and tactics employed by Sir Hugh Dowding, C-in-C, Fighter Command, who, in their eyes, had been unco-operative since pre-war days. When Churchill and Beaverbrook, previously his champions, appreciated that new leadership was needed in Fighter Command, more in tune with the aggressive role anticipated for the RAF in 1941, Dowding was replaced. With him went his protégé, Keith Park, AOC No.11 Group, who had borne the main burden of the daylight battle. Both later claimed that their removal stemmed from the Big Wing controversy over day fighting tactics, but other causes emerge from an examination of Dowding's career after 1936. Valid reasons can then be appreciated for his replacement; nevertheless, his later treatment by the Air Ministry and politicians was less than honourable.

INTRODUCTION

Few notable battles in British history have escaped a cloud of mythology. At no time has this been more true than when, in the popular mind, the event has involved a deliverance from the possibility of invasion. In the national memory the defeat of the Armada and the Battle of Trafalgar occupy pinnacles of resistance to attempts at foreign occupation which last succeeded at the Norman Conquest.

This thesis sets out to explore several of the orthodox beliefs and actualities which marked a similar occasion in the twentieth century. The Battle of Britain has come to stand beside the two earlier feats of arms and has been invested with greater accolades not only because the events were more widely reported but also because the course of the struggle took place over the mainland of the United Kingdom. There were, and still are, thousands of witnesses who have often needed little prompting to explore the paths of recollection. In the minds of many, the fighting in the skies above southern England brought a personal salvation from disaster.

A general understanding of the battle is often at fault at two levels. The first of these lies in the public mind, where amply fed myths have grown and developed over half a century; the second has emerged from a number of books dealing with the event, some of which are personal reminiscence of limited aspects of the

battle, while others, lacking a depth of research, tend to be superficial repetitions of what the authors presumed to have happened. (1)

The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the battle in two particular areas. One concerns its nature, why and how it was fought by both sides, under what leadership and strategy, and by which tactics. It will examine and attempt to add balance to the general assessment of the contest as a struggle between the David of the Royal Air Force and the Goliath of the Luftwaffe. In the long run, the crux of the battle was a struggle for supremacy between two sets of single-seater fighters, over a small arc of southern England. Were 'The Few' so few, or was an inordinate pressure placed on them by strategy and tactics which could have been improved?

The other area, explored in some detail, concerns the controversy over the contribution made to Fighter Command by its Commander-in-Chief, Air Chief-Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding, and his relationship with other senior officers at the Air Ministry. This is examined from the pre-war period, through the Battle of Britain, until his replacement by Air Vice-Marshal W.S. Douglas, then Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, in November 1940. Closely linked with this episode is the fate of Dowding's protégé, Air Vice-Marshal K. Park, Air Officer Commanding, No.11 Group. He was superseded in the following month by Air Vice-Marshal T. Leigh-Mallory, AOC, No.12 Group.

1. 'People choose the past they need, or think they need'. J.C. Cairns, 'Some Recent Historians and the "Strange Defeat" of 1940', *Journal of Modern History (JMH)*, 46, 1 (1974), pp.60-85, p.72.

First, the battle itself should be seen as an invasion of the United Kingdom, in spite of later claims that the campaign prevented invasion. For a period of almost four months the Luftwaffe mounted a considerable offensive, intruding each day into Britain. A nation's sovereign territory consists of land, territorial waters and air space; a German aircraft flying over a British town was carrying out an act of invasion as definite as that made by a warship entering territorial waters, or a tank attacking a strong-point in its streets.

The reality was that the battle deflected the possibility of an enemy occupation of Britain, which could have been achieved in one or both of two ways. The first would have been by the successful landing of the German Army, as the Kriegsmarine was in no position at that stage to affect the outcome by itself. The second would have been by the destruction, or neutralising, of the power of the RAF, so that the threat of aerial attack from the Luftwaffe would have forced the British Government to seek peace terms.(2)

The leadership, strategy and tactics of the Royal Air Force are examined, as responses were made to what were seen and feared as German threats of overwhelming proportions. However, it is now known that the menace was not so great as once believed and many

2. See G.Douhet, *Command of the Air* (London, 1943), p.83. Douhet, an Italian, advanced the theory that wars could be settled solely by air power. After an opposing force of aircraft had been defeated, the attacker would 'fly against the enemy while he has been deprived of the ability to do otherwise'. Aerial attacks would then destroy industries and commerce, and break the morale of civilians and armies.

writers have failed to examine the organisation, power and methods of the Luftwaffe at that time, to gain a more balanced view of the battle.

Few, also, have gone further to explore the opinion of a number of German commentators that there was no Battle of Britain in the sense that so many British people believe. For them, the period of daylight attacks was no more than one episode in the Western Campaign which stretched from the invasion of Norway and Denmark in April 1940, to the slowing down of the night Blitz in May 1941, prior to the invasion of Russia. They do not acknowledge that the Luftwaffe suffered defeat, as reported by most British sources, but that the German Air Force merely changed the course of its strategy and tactics when day bombing became less profitable than night attacks.(3) An enquiry is made into the question of whether this was a genuine alteration of policy at the time, or an excuse offered for failure.

On the British side there has, hitherto, been great stress laid on the importance of the day battle and of its effect on the activities of the Royal Air Force. There has been a neglect of the study of the perceived threat posed by night bombing which was, especially for politicians, a deeply worrying factor from September 1940. Certainly, as more recent research has shown, the resulting combination of fear and frustration felt both

3. See, for example, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal Kesselring*, translated by L.Hudson (London, 1953), p.79.

within Parliament and at the Air Ministry, helps at least partly to explain the changes made at Fighter Command in leadership and strategy towards the end of the year.(4)

In the second place, the role played in the battle by various RAF commanders is assessed. When, in October 1988, the Queen Mother unveiled a statue of Lord Dowding outside St Clement Danes, the RAF church in the heart of London, many British people whose memories stretched back almost half a century felt that, albeit belatedly, a kind of justice was done. For them, fair play had finally triumphed as a royal accolade was set posthumously on the shoulders of a man who, it appeared, had been deliberately snubbed by some of his colleagues and by politicians, ever since leading his fighter pilots during the Battle of Britain. Churchill had referred to these airmen as 'The Few'; for the British people, the period was 'their finest hour'.(5)

There was, however, a feeling among some others, not present on the day, that an exaggerated praise was being offered. In their view, he had proved to be a competent leader in whom conscientious application far exceeded flair and one who had been adequately rewarded at the time. They believed that the wartime leaders of the RAF together with several notable politicians, had gauged justly the part played by Dowding during the struggle and had placed him fairly and correctly in the hierarchy of honour.

4. See Group-Captain E.Haslam, 'How Lord Dowding Came to Leave Fighter Command', *Journal of Strategic Studies (JSS)*, 4, 2 (1981), pp.175-86.

5. See *The Times*, 21 October 1988, p.2.

A number of those who had worked closely with him had found the Commander-in-Chief to be intransigent and distant, stubborn and unadventurous. (6)

The eye of the storm of controversy, in the opinion of his supporters, lay in the fact that, having led Fighter Command to a narrow victory over Luftwaffe daylight attacks stretching from July to October 1940, and thereby having saved the nation by making a German seaborne invasion of Britain impracticable, Dowding was apparently removed in summary fashion late in November. He was despatched to the USA to obtain war equipment on a mission for which he was temperamentally unsuited, lacking to the necessary degree the qualities of tact and diplomacy, followed by several minor appointments until his retirement in June 1942. (7)

Two rewards came his way. On 30 September 1940 he was awarded the G.C.B. and on 11 May 1943 Churchill suggested that his name should be submitted for a Barony 'in view of your ever-memorable services to this country during the Battle of Britain'. (8) But two honours were never received and this has incensed his protagonists and caused waves of controversy that have not been

6. See, for example, R.Hough and D.Richards, *The Battle of Britain* (London, 1989), pp.314-34, and Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, 'Dowding and the Battle of Britain', *The Ampleforth Journal* (1970), pp.81-84.

7. See H.Probert, *High Commanders of the Royal Air Force* (HMSO, 1991), p.22, who writes of 'a role for which was quite unsuited and from which he soon had to be withdrawn'.

8. Dowding Papers, Aviation Records Department, Royal Air Force Museum, Hendon, AC 71/17/2, HCTD/ S.305, Churchill to Dowding, 11 May 1943.

stilled since. First, he was given no higher degree of peerage, for example, an earldom; second, he was not promoted to the pinnacle of the Service with the rank of Marshal of the Royal Air Force.

For many who sit in the Dowding camp, the circumstances of the Commander-in-Chief's removal from Fighter Command, together with the replacement of Park, are tainted with plot and intrigue.(9) In their view, the main plank of the case against him resulted from his refusal to counter large formations of Luftwaffe aircraft with Big Wings of RAF fighters, especially after 19 August.(10) They believed that pressure against Dowding was exerted within the Air Ministry by Douglas and Leigh-Mallory, both of whom supported Squadron-Leader Douglas Bader, the chief exponent of the use of Big Wings.

The charge continues with the claim that Flight-Lieutenant P.Macdonald, who was both Adjutant of Bader's squadron and a Member of Parliament, intervened by having a private meeting with Churchill at which he exposed the controversy. In this version, the Prime Minister followed up the matter with his customary vigour and steps were taken at a political level which accelerated Dowding's replacement.

9. See, for example, L.Deighton, *Fighter* (London, 1977), pp.271-73, and V.Orange, *Sir Keith Park* (London, 1984), p.121.

10. The 'Big Wing' was a description of a formation of at least three squadrons flying into action as a unified force under the control of one commander. It was also known as a 'Balbo', after General Italo Balbo, who led a large combined flight of Italian seaplanes on a two-way crossing of the Atlantic Ocean in 1933.

Although Dowding himself carried his succeeding disappointment with dignity, he was perfectly prepared after the war to allow two authors to set out his cause. Their books have been used by many other writers and students of the battle as if they were texts of unerring accuracy, complete in their assessment of Dowding and his background. Each, however, suffered from the disadvantage of having been written while the Commander-in-Chief sat close to the author's chair.

The first of these, *Leader of the Few*, (11) was published in 1957 when the writer, Basil Collier, had no access to a number of documents which have, more recently, placed different emphases on the battle and Dowding's subsequent treatment. The second work, *Dowding and the Battle of Britain*, (12) is a panegyric produced in 1969 by Robert Wright, who had at one time been Personal Assistant to the C-in-C. Wright claimed that the book was 'not a history of the Battle of Britain', but that it dealt with 'the personal story of what happened' to one of the participants. However, Wright was occasionally less than accurate and generally too uncritical, except of those whom he considered to be Dowding's enemies.

On the other side, works have been produced which reject the charges. In particular, *Flying Colours*, (13) by Bader's brother-in-law, explains in some detail his view of the background to the controversy over Big Wings and denies that either Leigh-Mallory

11. B.Collier, *Leader of the Few* (London, 1957).

12. R.Wright, *Dowding and the Battle of Britain* (London, 1969).

13. L.Lucas, *Flying Colours* (London, 1981)

or Bader was responsible for Macdonald's intervention. *Wings Over Westminster*, the autobiography of Lord Balfour, who was in 1940 the Under-Secretary of State for Air, also spoke for Dowding's opponents, although the work suffers from several inaccuracies.(14) Sir Maurice Dean, in *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars*,(15) summarised Dowding's relationship with the Air Ministry, as seen through the eyes of a civil servant there. A new aspect of the argument was unveiled through the article written in 1981 by Group-Captain Haslam,(16) which suggested that the main reason for the removal of the Commander-in-Chief was related more to his inability to counter the night Blitz than to any other cause.

This thesis attempts to show that, in reality, there were seven reasons for Dowding's replacement. Three existed even before the Battle of Britain began. They were his age, his long period of service at Fighter Command, and his reputation in the Air Ministry for being less than co-operative.

As the battle developed, four further reasons appeared. His failure to settle with authority the differences over tactics between Park and Leigh-Mallory was the first. Secondly, he appeared to lack a sense of urgency in meeting German night attacks after 7 September. Thirdly, a more aggressive commander was required to launch Fighter Command into a role of offensive

14. Lord Balfour, *Wings Over Westminster* (London, 1973). For inaccuracies, see below, Chapter 7.

15. Sir Maurice Dean, *The Royal Air Force and Two World Wars* (London, 1979).

16. See above, note 4.

operations after Luftwaffe day attacks petered out. The fourth was that by October he had lost the essential political support of Beaverbrook, the Minister of Aircraft Production, and of Churchill, the Prime Minister, both of whom had earlier held him in the highest esteem.

The thesis sets out to explain why, at the end of a phase of the air war to which they had contributed so much, both Dowding and Park were removed and replaced respectively by Douglas and Leigh-Mallory, who seemed to be their chief critics and opponents. Fifty years on, the apparent enigma remains and high passions are still aroused on both sides when some of the matters of controversy are reviewed.

CHAPTER ONEDOWDING'S POSITION AT THE START OF THE BATTLE

PART 1: 16 - 17	INTRODUCTION
PART 2: 18 - 35	QUESTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN FIGHTER COMMAND, JULY, 1940
PART 3: 36 - 63	DOWDING'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE AIR STAFF BEFORE 1940
PART 4: 64 - 82	THE FRENCH CONNECTION
PART 5: 83 - 92	CONCLUSION: WHY RETAIN DOWDING?

PART ONE - INTRODUCTION

Critics of the removal of Air Chief-Marshal Sir Hugh Dowding from his post as Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command on 25 November 1940 explain it largely as a result of events which occurred during the daylight air battle in August and September, especially the controversy over the most effective tactics to counter Luftwaffe formations. They offer the same reason for the superseding of Air Vice-Marshal Keith Park as Air Officer Commanding, No.11 Group, some days later. The two commanders themselves, in later writings and statements, concentrated on this aspect of their activities, giving rise to a widely accepted opinion that it was the main, or only reason causing their replacement.(1)

What is not generally acknowledged by many who censure the motives and actions of several Service and political leaders during the later months of 1940 is that the campaign to replace Dowding was well under way even before the air battle opened. The events of October and November were no more than a culmination of long-standing dissensions over the leadership, strategy and tactics of Fighter Command.

1. See particularly Orange, Chapters 9-11; Wright, Chapters 11-14; J.Terraine, *The Right of the Line* (London, 1985), pp.213-17; Collier, *Leader of the Few*, Chapter 22; Deighton, pp.287-89; A.J.P.Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford, 1965), p.500.

To gain a balanced view, it is necessary first to examine in some detail the background of Dowding's relationship with the Air Ministry and with other colleagues. It may then become clear that continuing mutual antipathy over a number of points of policy was a salient factor in his subsequent replacement. Also, it can be demonstrated, that the clear intention of the Air Ministry, even as the battle began, was for Dowding to be replaced as soon as conveniently possible, and certainly by the end of October. The main reason why he was still holding his position in July was, in the eyes of Air Council, more the need to maintain continuity of leadership at Fighter Command during a most difficult period than any respect felt by them for his abilities or character.

In addition, at that time Dowding was enjoying the support of two powerful politicians, Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, and Lord Beaverbrook, Minister of Aircraft Production. They believed that he was the right man for the task immediately at hand, namely holding off the Luftwaffe through a defensive campaign.

* * *

PART TWO - QUESTIONS OF LEADERSHIP IN FIGHTERCOMMAND, JULY 1940

Differences over Dowding's tenure of office can be seen at the highest level on Wednesday 10 July, the very day he later selected as the commencement of the Battle of Britain.(2) The Prime Minister felt compelled to send a Private and Confidential letter to Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary of State for Air.(3) In view not only of what had happened to the fortunes of the Royal Air Force during the battle for France and the evacuation from Dunkirk, but also of the impending threat of a German assault upon the United Kingdom, his opening sentence was remarkable. 'I was very much taken aback the other night when you told me that you had been considering removing Sir Hugh Dowding at the expiration of his present appointment', he stated, 'but that you had come to the conclusion that he might be allowed to stay on for another four months'.(4)

2. See AIR 8/863, Sir Hugh Dowding's Despatch, the Battle of Britain, 20 August 1941, Public Record Office (PRO), Kew; also published as a supplement to *The London Gazette*, 11 September 1946, pp.4543-71. Dowding chose that day because it 'saw the employment by the Germans of the first really big formation intended primarily to bring our Fighter Defence to battle on a large scale'; p.4544, paragraph 13.

3. AIR 19/572, Secretary of State's file on Sir Hugh Dowding, Churchill to Sinclair, 10 July 1940.

4. See Dowding Papers, HCTD/S.305, Enclosure 1A, Newall to Dowding, 30 March 1940. In the letter, Dowding was requested to retire on 14 July 1940.

Churchill went on to say that, in his opinion, Dowding was 'one of the very best men you have got', a judgement made after knowing him for two years. He had admired the work of the Commander-in-Chief and expressed confidence in a man 'so gifted and so trusted'. In fact, Churchill recommended, Sinclair should consider prolonging Dowding's appointment indefinitely, while the war lasted.

The letter then went further, even suggesting a possible promotion. Undoubtedly, Churchill had in mind the office of Chief of the Air Staff, occupied since 1937 by Air Chief-Marshal Sir Cyril Newall, whose popularity lagged as his time for replacement was approaching. The Prime Minister concluded by saying that he disapproved of making changes of that nature 'except when there is some proved failure or inadequacy', an accusation which could hardly have been aimed at Dowding before the start of the air battle over Britain.

Churchill, on that day, was expressing a firm and unequivocal belief in Dowding's suitability for his post and made plain which officer he wanted to lead Fighter Command. He appreciated the role which Dowding and his men would be compelled to play in the forthcoming months, yet it is surprising that he was prepared to recommend the offer of such a long lease of office to him; no one could foretell the duration of the war, or what changes might be required of Fighter Command before then.

In assessing the career and subsequent dismissal of Dowding, it is instructive to assess the reputations of Newall and Sinclair at that stage of the war. Both were held in low esteem by several politicians. For example, Stanley Bruce, the Australian

High Commissioner in London, met Beaverbrook on 2 July and wrote, 'We were in complete agreement that Newall had not the fighting weight necessary for the position of C.A.S.'. On 10 July, the very day that Dowding's future was under review, Bruce discussed Newall's abilities, or lack of them, with Sinclair. Bruce told him that he had always had 'the gravest doubts' of Newall's competence and, referring to the French campaign, that 'the difficulty in getting decisions was an obvious indictment of Newall, who after all was responsible'. Sinclair, in defence of his C.A.S., called him 'a first class Staff Officer', yet claimed that if he 'was not the man to be Chief of the Air Staff' he would remove him.

Bruce, a shrewd politician, added an assessment of Sinclair. 'I have great doubts, however, whether he would take such definite action whatever was the result of such examination as he is making'. That was Bruce's second expression of reservation over Sinclair. On 10 June he had written, 'While a perfectly nice person I do not think Sinclair is much good or has any particular force and drive'. Bruce's papers underline the factor that political interest in, and effect on, the activities of the RAF at that time was very strong.(5)

* * *

5. Bruce Papers, Australian Archives, Belconnen, Canberra, Australia, M.100: 10 June 1940, 2 July 1940 and 10 July 1940. J.Colville, *Churchillians* (London, 1981), p.145, gives more on Beaverbrook's opinion of Newall. 'He was an Observer in the last War and has remained an Observer ever since'.

Churchill's letter was only one in a long sequence of correspondence concerning Dowding's position and his future. It fitted into a cluster written around the opening of the Battle of Britain, but can also be linked to a series of notes and letters dating back to 1937. Taken together, they paint with some clarity the astringent relationship which grew between the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command and various senior officers in the Air Ministry. They form a catalogue of controversy, acting as guides and pointers to his removal from office, his replacement by Air Vice-Marshal W.S. Douglas and to the strategic and tactical role of Fighter Command both before and after that date. Without a study of the development of this relationship, the fate of Dowding and, by extension, that of Park, cannot be seen in perspective.

That most recent passage of arms between Dowding and his superiors can be followed back to the letter he received from Newall on 30 March 1940, one day before he was due to be retired.⁽⁶⁾ This asked him to continue at his post until 14 July, when he would have held office for four years. Newall hoped that Dowding would agree and reinforced one strong reason held by the Air Ministry for wanting him to remain, namely that 'we may be on the verge of intensified air activity'. He then spoke highly of Fighter Command's efficiency and acknowledged Dowding's role in achieving it.

6. See above, Note 4.

Nevertheless, Newall made the point that he sometimes had the 'uncongenial task' of asking senior officers to resign, to provide opportunities of promotion for others. Therefore Dowding would be asked to retire on 14 July, although the RAF would 'greatly regret' the move.

On the following day Dowding replied that he would agree to the Air Ministry's wishes and asked the name of his successor.(7) No answer was received and when, by the early days of July, with his tenure almost expired and the Luftwaffe sitting at the gate, Dowding had heard no more, he contacted Newall to learn what was to happen. According to Wright, the exchange concluded with him sharply telling the Chief of the Air Staff, 'If you want to get rid of me, then get rid of me, but don't do it in this way'.(8)

After consultations with Sinclair, Newall wrote to Dowding on 5 July, with the request that the Commander-in-Chief would stay on because of 'present conditions'. He offered an appointment until the end of October, a new terminal date obviously agreed with the Secretary of State.(9)

Dowding's tenacity in battle over what was, to him, a point of principle, was just as great as in any struggle against the Luftwaffe. Two days later, he replied at length with a detailed account of previous episodes in the saga of his RAF service.(10)

7. Dowding Papers, HCTD/S.305, Dowding to Newall, 31 March 1940.

8. Wright, p.137.

9. Dowding Papers, HCTD/S.305, Newall to Dowding, 5 July 1940.

10. AIR 19/572, Enclosure 1A, Dowding to Newall, 7 July 1940.

It could be claimed that he also had a potent remembrance of real, or imagined, blows received. Newall was invited to cast his mind back to February 1937 when Marshal of the Royal Air Force, Sir Edward Ellington, the then Chief of the Air Staff, informed Dowding that he would not be succeeding him, but that his rank should ensure employment until the age of sixty, an anniversary that would have been reached in 1942.(11)

However, on 4 August 1938 a letter from the Air Council had told him that his services would not be required after June 1939.(12) Then, claimed Dowding, on 23 February the *Evening Standard* had announced his impending retirement and named his successor, while on the following day Newall had telephoned him to say that the Air Ministry intended to make no change during the year.

Dowding next stated that on 10 March 1939, during an interview with Sir Kingsley Wood, the Secretary of State for Air, he announced his unwillingness to continue without the full backing of the Air Council, previously denied to him. This resulted, he wrote, in verbal assurance, but a week later, he sent a reminder that an answer was still awaited. That was followed on 20 March by a letter from Newall asking him to serve until the end of March 1940.(13)

11. Dowding Papers, HCTD/ S.305, Ellington to Dowding, 5 February 1937.

12. Ibid, Air Ministry to Dowding, 4 August 1938.

13. Ibid, Newall to Dowding, 20 March 1939.

This date rested in Dowding's mind until, one day before its arrival, he received another request from Newall setting the new destination of 14 July. It was the passage of correspondence and action following that which led to Churchill's intervention with Sinclair on the very day that the main Battle of Britain commenced.

Dowding's letter referred to the discourtesy and lack of consideration he had been shown. He had, in total, been offered five retirement dates and reminded Newall that he would have been pleased to retire before the war. Now, however, he was anxious to remain, 'because I feel that there is no one else who will fight as I do when proposals are made which would reduce the Defence Forces of the Country below the extreme danger point'.

Dowding never hesitated to speak his mind, a quality that not everyone found engaging. Here he was referring obliquely to the controversy which had existed between him and the Air Staff over two matters. The first was the number of squadrons needed by Fighter Command to comprise an adequate defence for the Home Base. The second was the attempt made during the recent French campaign to despatch more fighter squadrons to France. These efforts were, in Newall's opinion, resisted by him as leader of the Air Staff, with the support of Dowding. In the C-in-C's judgement, however, he alone had stood firmly against them while the Air Staff hedged. He well knew the effects his words would have, hence the reference was a barbed reminder.

Dowding's letter concluded with the statement that he should not be asked to give up his post, except at his own request, before 1942, or the end of the war, 'whichever is the earlier'. Such

a demand was unreasonable from a senior commander who should have realised that, with the exigencies of war, no one, from the Prime Minister down, had an irrevocable right to any position. The letter was then despatched to Newall and a copy sent to Sinclair.(14) Dowding's exasperation and tenacity in fighting for his own cause were matched by his determination that his sense of injustice should be widely known.

Sinclair's reply was dated 10 July and, evidently in the meantime, he mentioned the matter to Churchill. His letter gives the impression that he wished the appearance of authority for the control of Dowding's position to be shared and agreed by himself and the Service.(15)

Nonetheless, the C-in-C was in no mood to let matters rest and sent a further letter to the Secretary of State two days later, telling him particularly of 'circumstances which occurred before you assumed your present office'. He then pressed further, seeking an apology, and confirmation that he was to retire at the end of October.(16)

Sinclair was noted as a paragon of good manners and his reply was tactful, as might have been expected of an experienced politician.(17) There were three parts of the letter worthy of

14. AIR 19/572, Enclosure 2A, Dowding to Sinclair, 7 July 1940.

15. Ibid, Enclosure 3A, Sinclair to Dowding, 10 July 1940. Sinclair wrote 'I can only say that the Chief of the Air Staff consulted me before asking you to retain your Command'.

16. Ibid, Enclosure 5A, Dowding to Sinclair, 12 July 1940.

17. Ibid, Enclosure 6A, Sinclair to Dowding, 13 July 1940.

special note. The first avoided dealing with matters that had occurred before he came to office and spoke of concern only with a decision for which he was responsible to Parliament, namely that Dowding should remain until the end of October. This reinforced the fact that the final responsibility for Service appointments rested with politicians. The second was a judgement tinged with prophecy, when Sinclair added that he did not look beyond October, by which time he believed that the issue of the war would be determined. His only pre-occupation, he asserted, was to have the best Commander-in-Chief for Fighter Command. His third statement, on the proposed length of Dowding's service, was categorical. 'That decision must stand', he announced.

The Secretary of State's diplomacy was shown when he promised to bear Dowding's point of view in mind before taking further decisions. Also, he claimed to appreciate the importance and fairness of communicating with the C-in-C 'in good time'.

Nevertheless, it is instructive to note the mood of the Air Ministry at the time to Dowding's employment. Sinclair would not agree to the C-in-C's request, but remained firm on 31 October as the target date. This was confirmed by an official letter sent the same day.(18) Dowding's response was an acceptance, but instead of agreeing to the suggested date, he cannily inserted the words, 'for so long as my services may be required'.(19) The

18. Dowding Papers, HCTD/ S.305, Air Ministry to Dowding, 13 July 1940.

19. Ibid, Dowding to Air Ministry, 14 July 1940.

Air Ministry's reply was equally shrewd, avoiding the mention of any further date, but noting 'your willingness to continue in your present appointment'.(20)

Far more satisfying for the C-in-C was a longer and more conciliatory letter from Newall.(21) The opening paragraph was apologetic, mentioning inconvenience and lack of consideration, caused by the stress of events in recent years. Newall added, 'May I ask you to accept my sincere apologies'.

The CAS continued by explaining the pressures, on the one hand of needing to provide opportunities of promotion within the Service, while on the other, of maintaining continuity at Fighter Command. Then he crossed swords over which of them had done more to oppose the dissipation of fighter forces during the French campaign, deftly turning the tables by stating, 'I was glad to have your support'. This remark was guaranteed to infuriate Dowding who believed that he alone had saved them.

Newall, on the other hand, had a broader view of the RAF's responsibilities and displayed it when he pointed out the dilemma of the Air Staff. On the one hand they had struggled hard to conserve forces for home defence, while on the other it was their

20. Ibid, Air Ministry to Dowding, dated July 1940.

21. AIR 19/572, Enclosure 7A, Newall to Dowding, 13 July 1940. Newall wrote, 'I must ask you to make it convenient to defer your retirement until the end of October.'

duty to implement Government decisions. The letter closed by applauding Sinclair's expression of confidence in Dowding, but would not be moved on the new date for retirement.(22)

This sequence of correspondence is revealing of Dowding's tenuous hold on his position at the start of an air campaign for which he had prepared during the previous four years. Little imagination is needed to estimate the time being used by the C-in-C to defend himself at a period when exceptional demands were being made upon him to counter a growing air offensive. The extent of Dowding's 'double-war' has not been sufficiently acknowledged and, regardless of where the fault lay, this was a heavy burden on his leadership.

On 14 July he wrote two further letters. One, to Newall, immediately seized on the apology, which he accepted. To circumvent the CAS's claim regarding which of them had stopped the flow of fighters to France, Dowding said that he was thinking equally of events in the first two months of the war. He finished, however, on a less than amiable note by calling it a point on which they could not be expected to see eye to eye. He added that further discussion would be unprofitable.(23)

22. See Sir John Slessor, *The Central Blue* (London, 1956), p.241. In the opinion of Slessor, then Director of Plans (D.Plans) at the Air Ministry, Dowding has received public credit for his stand against sending extra fighters to France. 'It is far less remembered that Dowding's superior, the man who backed him and with whom (under the Prime Minister) rested the real responsibility for that decision ... was the C.A.S.'

23. AIR 19/572, Enclosure 8A, Dowding to Newall, 14 July 1940.

An apparent confusion between Churchill and Sinclair over the exact future length of Dowding's tenure of office was displayed in the C-in-C's other letter written that day, to the Secretary of State. (24) It opened by claiming that, while dining with the Prime Minister the previous evening, he had learned that he had secured his confidence and that Churchill wished him to remain on the Active List, with no retirement date offered. Churchill, according to Dowding, had told him that he had written to Sinclair on the matter.

An interesting partial recantation of the Prime Minister's views, as expressed on 10 July, can be deduced from a comment, written in Sinclair's hand, and signed 'AHMS' on the copy of the letter he had received from Churchill. He claimed that the Prime Minister had agreed that matters should rest 'at the point reached in my letter to C-in-C' and that the position could be reconsidered in a month or more. There is no written evidence of what passed between Sinclair and Churchill at that meeting, but obviously, at least in the Secretary of State's understanding, the Prime Minister was no longer insisting on having Dowding's appointment extended indefinitely. (25)

It is not clear why Churchill apparently changed his mind. There is a possibility that he was giving one judgement to both men on which they were placing different interpretations. It is also possible, however, that each man was being offered a separate and

24. Ibid, Enclosure 9A, Dowding to Sinclair, 14 July 1940.

25. Ibid, Churchill to Sinclair, 10 July 1940.

conflicting decision. A speculative explanation is that both Sinclair and Dowding were desperate for the Prime Minister's approbation; they therefore seized on any part of his remarks which appeared to support their particular case.

Reference was made to Dowding's visit to Churchill at Chequers on the evening of the 13th by John Colville, one of the Prime Minister's secretaries. According to him, Churchill announced that the previous four days had been glorious for the RAF, showing the faith he had at that stage in what Fighter Command was achieving under Dowding's leadership. Yet it may well have been that at least part of that faith came from Churchill's acceptance of an incorrect ratio of casualties suffered by each side, through which he gained a distorted view of British success. (26)

Dowding also assessed the merits and weaknesses of Hurricanes and Defiants. Referring to Luftwaffe aircraft, he was surprised that the Germans had not yet protected the rear of their engines with armour plate; if that were done, RAF tactics would have to change. An augury of troubles to come for the C-in-C arrived when there was discussion of the German beam which could be used to lead bombers over their targets in darkness. (27)

26. See J. Colville, *The Fringes of Power: Downing Street Diaries, 1939-1945* (London, 1985), p.194. Churchill claimed that 'the enemy had come and had lost five to one'. Compare the figures offered, based on both RAF and Luftwaffe returns, in *The Battle of Britain, Then and Now*, edited by W.G. Ramsey (London, 1980). For the period 10-13 July inclusive, the losses shown are: RAF, 20 aircraft; Luftwaffe, 43 aircraft.

27. *Colville Diaries*, p.194. The German beam was 'codenamed Headache'. Dowding's closeness to the Prime Minister allowed him to relate that recently 'he dreamt that there was only one man in England who could use a Bofors gun and his name was William Shakespeare'.

In his letter to Sinclair, Dowding was careful to distance himself from any possible accusations of currying favour. He claimed that no minister had learned from him of the approaching retirement, in case it was thought that the Prime Minister's intervention was more than a coincidence. In concluding, Dowding added, with, it may be suspected, a certain grim satisfaction, that he had received a letter from Newall containing an apology, which he had written to accept.

The question presents itself why the C-in-C wrote to Sinclair on this occasion. Probably he believed that the Prime Minister was an ally at a time of considerable strain between himself and the Air Ministry, and one whose support he wanted to advertise. He did this to shore up his position in Fighter Command against those considered as enemies. Dowding obviously was very sensitive over the matter, as he emphasised that he had done nothing underhand to gain that support, a point made unnecessarily by an officer noted for honourable conduct and straight dealing.(28) The episode shows that he was more deeply affected by fears for his personal position than is generally acknowledged.

* * *

28. Among instances offered by many people of Dowding's conduct being 'above board', his former Personal Assistant recollected that when the Commander-in-Chief received Christmas presents from various firms, he refused to accept them but had them returned, with a note of thanks. Interview, Wing-Commander H.H.Ironside, Norwich, 27 August 1989.

The importance of this passage of correspondence has not previously been assessed sufficiently. Collier's biography does mention the letters, but with little exploration of their detail. Wright refers at length to the letters between Dowding and the Air Ministry, but had no sight of Churchill's correspondence with Sinclair, which adds a further dimension to the controversy. (29)

The letters are an explicit demonstration that the C-in-C, Fighter Command felt particularly aggrieved at the start of July by what he considered to be the shabby treatment offered to him by the Air Ministry. Nor was it, in his recollection, a sudden disagreement, but rather a saga which he could - and did in some detail - trace back to 1937.

Also the letters display a less than general friendship between Dowding and Newall, a situation which had existed for some years while both held senior positions, and more especially since Newall had been preferred to Dowding for the post of Chief of the Air Staff in 1937. In Dowding's recollection, some rivalry had existed even in their young subaltern careers. (30)

Nonetheless, the letters also show clearly the Air Ministry's intention that Dowding should be replaced. Newall's reference to the need to offer promotion to other officers was a most important factor in their policy and one often overlooked by the

29. See Collier, *Leader of the Few*, pp.72-75, and Wright, p.25.

30. See Wright, p.25.

accentuation of their earlier thoughtless treatment of the C-in-C. Both Newall and Sinclair were apologetic for what had happened in the past, but, in examining the role of Dowding and Fighter Command, it is vital to recognise their agreement that after October there should be a change in leadership.

* * *

In the minds of the Air Staff by July 1940 there were three main reasons why Dowding should be replaced.

The first was his age. Dowding, born on 24 April 1882, was fifty-eight years old and the senior of all RAF officers holding an active Command. Although retirement was laid down for a man in his position at sixty years, that was regarded then as a comparatively greater age than it is at the present day, when the average expectation of life for men has increased. The importance of this point is that there were, on the sidelines, a number of staff some ten or fifteen years younger, who were ready and waiting for advancement. At all times, the Royal Air Force has recognised the need to offer opportunities of promotion to staff in their mid- and late-forties, with the result that at least some will reach the pinnacle of rank well before retiring. The value of this policy of encouraging talent can be realised by noting the careers of some of those officers who were, during the war years, presented with the chance of showing their abilities as commanders. Examples included five who finally

reached the rank of Marshal of the Royal Air Force - Sir Arthur Harris (born, 1892), Sir John Slessor (b.1897), Lord Tedder (b.1890), Lord Douglas (b.1893) and Lord Portal (b.1893).(31)

Secondly, with the realisation of Dowding's age went the fact that he had been at Fighter Command since its foundation on 14 July 1936. The Service custom was for an officer to hold such a position for two or three years before being moved to gain further and wider experience in another position. In Dowding's case his four years at Fighter Command was an exceptional length of time.(32)

Dowding represented part of the 'Old Guard' of the RAF. He was aged thirty-two even at the opening of the First World War and had been, first in the Royal Flying Corps, then in the RAF, continuously since then. Of his closer contemporaries, Marshal of the Royal Air Force Sir Edward Ellington (b.1887) had left the post of CAS in 1937 and was presently Inspector-General of the Royal Air Force. ACM Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt (b.1886) had been relieved of his post as C-in-C, Bomber Command on 3 April 1940 and had also been appointed an Inspector-General. MRAF Sir John Salmond (b.1881), who had been CAS between 1930 and 1933,

31. See, for example, Dean, p.308. Dean wrote of Trenchard's 'famous personal Air Force list' and his part in Portal's advancement.

32. D.Richards and H.Saunders, *Royal Air Force, 1939-1945*, 3 vols. (HMSO, 1974), i, Appendices 1 and 2, show that between July 1936 and October 1940, Bomber Command had four Air Officers Commanding; between July 1933 and December 1940 there were five Air Members for Personnel (AMP).

was Director of Armament Production at the newly formed Ministry of Aircraft Production. ACM Sir Cyril Newall (b.1886), was himself approaching his final period as CAS.

However, the third, and main, reason why the Air Council believed that Dowding should be replaced was the nature of their mutual relationship over a number of years.

* * *

PART THREE: DOWDING'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE
AIR STAFF BEFORE 1940

In the Commander-in-Chief's view, the Air Ministry had acted less than fairly towards him ever since 1937 when he was not appointed as Chief of the Air Staff. Although putting a brave face on the issue at the time and later acknowledging that his talents found greater fulfilment at Fighter Command than in the more claustrophobic atmosphere of the Air Ministry, there is no doubt that he felt the rejection deeply.(33)

Over the following three years, Dowding developed an increasing disrespect for the Air Staff in general. He believed that they failed to share his enthusiasm for the overwhelming importance of fighter defence and thus regarded many of them as vacillating in policy and incompetent in its execution.

But while his outlook was clear in a narrow field, to the extent that it sometimes became tunnel-vision, theirs was necessarily panoramic and thus tended to blur when options overlapped or competed. Ministers and Heads of Department there had suffered

33. According to Wright, p.60, Dowding had been told that he would be the next Chief of the Air Staff by Ellington himself, by MRAF Sir John Salmond, a previous holder of the post and by Sir Frederick Bowhill, the Air Member for Personnel. See also Collier, *Leader of the Few*, pp.168-69. Dean, pp.141-43, remarks that 'an apostolic succession in the military sense has never, and fortunately never, been part of our constitutional inheritance'. M.Smith, *British Air Strategy Between the Wars* (London, 1984), p.39, believes that Dowding would not have made a good CAS, 'being rather too prickly a colleague as far as many of his contemporaries were concerned'.

for years from lack of finance, from the effects of the stagnation of the Depression and, at the late awakening to the need for rearmament, from the demands for resources from other Services. At one and the same time they had to register in perspective a variety of needs, including the building of all types of aircraft, provision of supplies, co-operation with the Army and the Royal Navy, the training of sufficient aircrew, the development of Radio Direction Finding (RDF) and Intelligence services, and the construction of airfields.(34)

These and many other commitments descended daily on their desks - and sometimes their heads - in an unremitting dive-bombing of urgent requests. It is small wonder that Dowding's needs had to be placed beside others, seldom to his appreciation - or theirs. In his view, nevertheless, the Air Staff consisted largely of men immersed in misguided policies, lacking the determination to fight for the needs of the RAF, by which he meant primarily Fighter Command.

Dowding's feelings were demonstrated in notes he wrote in February 1939, while preparing a catalogue of complaint against them. It is instructive to note his claim that the 'very cavalier treatment' had started two years earlier, that is, the

34. H.Montgomery-Hyde, *British Air Policy Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London, 1976), Appendix vi, 'Comparative Table of Service Estimates, 1920-1938', shows that, in those years, the proportion allocated to the RAF was 17% of the total. See also Dean, Chapter 6 and Smith, Chapters 8 and 9.

period when he failed to become CAS. He wrote that he was dealing with vital matters neglected by them for fifteen years and accused them of inertia. They had taken decisions about Fighter Command without consulting him and he finished by hoping that his successor would be *persona grata*, with the inference that he was not. (35)

The Air Ministry's opinion of these matters presents a different picture. In the first place, Dowding had never been regarded as the pre-eminent RAF commander by three of the four Secretaries of State for Air under whom he served. The first of these, the Earl of Swinton, did not think of him as the best, placing Air Vice-Marshal W. Freeman first among air commanders when he took over. (36)

The second, Sir Kingsley Wood, had difficulties with Dowding in February and March 1939, which led to the Commander-in-Chief's critical notes. (37) The third, Sir Samuel Hoare, who held the post briefly, for a period of 35 days in April and May 1940, offered higher praise to Dowding in his memoirs. Nevertheless,

35. Dowding Papers, HCTD/ S.305, Dowding's notes, written about 21 March 1939. He claimed that he had written to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (DCAS), 'begging him to ensure a proper liaison and consultation in matters affecting my command'.

36. Dean, p.142, described Swinton as 'the greatest as well as the shrewdest of all the political heads of the R.A.F.'. Swinton himself, after giving Air Marshal Sir Wilfred Freeman the pride of place, wrote, 'Next among the seniors I would put Dowding, Newall and Bowhill'. Earl of Swinton, *Sixty Years of Power* (London, 1966), pp.230-31.

37. See above, Note 35.

his statement that expansion of the fighter force was 'due to his foresight' would have been contested by a number of the Air Staff, and some politicians.(38)

Others, also, found Dowding less than easy in their relationship. This was noted by a number of senior commanders who had close dealings with him. Arthur Harris, subsequently C-in-C, Bomber Command, for example, was told in 1938 that he was being posted to Fighter Command as Dowding's Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO). Later he commented, 'My heart went into my boots'. He had had many rows when the C-in-C was Air Member for Research and Development (AMRD), and he was in Plans. As an instance, there had been disagreement over the need for aircraft to be better equipped with instruments for blind flying and for navigation. Harris claimed that he could not afford to be polite to Dowding on these matters 'when he started laying his ears back and being stubborn. Stubborn as a mule, but a nice old boy really. He was just out of touch with flying'(39)

The impression of 'the somewhat prickly Dowding'(40) and his aloofness was shared by some in the aircraft industry. Harold Penrose, the Manager of Westland Civil Aircraft from 1928, and later their chief test pilot, wrote that his sobriquet, 'Stuffy',

38. Viscount Templewood, *Nine Troubled Years* (London, 1955), pp.355-56.

39. D.Saward, *'Bomber' Harris* (London, 1984), p.80.

40. J.Cross, *Lord Swinton* (Oxford, 1982), p.150.

was apt. 'Humourless, withdrawn, he masked his quick perception and kept his distance with designers and directors of the aircraft industry'. Penrose continued by saying that Dowding was a magnificent leader, blessed with good judgement and the courage to uphold it. However, he suffered in comparison with his successor, Wilfrid Freeman, who was a taller, younger man of charm and handsome appearance to whom the industry quickly responded with mutual friendliness.(41)

Air Marshal Sir Philip Joubert, Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (ACAS), who differed from Dowding over a number of issues,(42) wrote that he could be 'extremely exacting and tiresome to his subordinates' and that, although good on technical matters, he was inclined 'to spend too much time on details and less than sufficient on principles'.(43)

41. H.Penrose, *British Aviation: Ominous Skies, 1935-1939* (HMSO, 1980), p.59. Dowding's reserve was remembered by a former Personal Assistant who once travelled with the C-in-C sitting beside him, in the back of a Staff car from Bristol to London. 'We never spoke a word. I, as a junior officer, never felt in a position to open the conversation and he never did. I felt that he was totally pre-occupied with his own thoughts, planning, etc.'. Ironside interview, 27 August 1989.

42. The difference between Joubert and Dowding stemmed from a root of controversy over filtering, that is, the best method of transmitting information received from Radio Direction Finding (RDF) to fighter squadrons. See AIR 2/5056, Fighter Command Interception problems, January 1940, for some disagreements in the early stages of the war. Afterwards, Dowding felt that he had 'seen off' Joubert. More critical differences arose during discussions on night fighting later in the year. See below, Chapter 6. See also AIR 20/4298, Night Air Defence Committee, especially Enclosure 12, 1 October 1940. For information on filtering, see AIR 41/18, Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB), iv, The Beginning of the Fighter Offensive, November 1940-December 1941, part 1, paragraphs 33-48.

43. Sir Philip Joubert, *The Third Service* (London, 1955), pp.129-30.

These views have been summarised by Denis Richards, author of the Official History of the RAF, in referring to Dowding's unclubbable and less than co-operative nature, often displayed to those with whom he disagreed. 'Dowding was really very difficult', in his opinion and, as several opponents appreciated, 'tact was not a weapon in Dowding's armoury'.(44)

The relationship between Dowding and his subordinate, Air Vice-Marshal Trafford Leigh-Mallory, Air Officer Commanding, No.12 Group, was far from cordial. This salient factor in the later controversy over tactics was remembered by one of Leigh-Mallory's aides, present at the conference following the Air Defence exercises of 1939. Dowding spoke for over an hour on the fifty-six items on the agenda, then turned to his two commanders of Groups. 'Gossage, you've got five minutes; so have you, Leigh-Mallory'. Even less friendliness was attracted by the remark the aide heard Dowding make in front of several other senior officers. 'The trouble with you, Leigh-Mallory, is that you sometimes cannot see further than the end of your little nose'.(45)

44. Letter, Denis Richards, 2 December 1989. See also Dowding's obituary which noted that, in official dealings, 'he was not an easy man. To him slackness, hypocrisy and self-seeking were not peccadilloes but scarlet sins'. He was 'sometimes impatient with colleagues and subordinates whom he suspected of adopting standards lower than his own'. *The Times*, 16 February 1970, p.10.

45. Interview, Air Chief-Marshal Sir Kenneth Cross, RAF Club, Piccadilly, 25 September 1989. Air Vice-Marshal E.L.Gossage was then AOC, No.11 Group.

Leigh-Mallory's attitude to his Commander-in-Chief varied, according to eye-witnesses. Sir Kenneth Cross recollected that he never heard Leigh-Mallory make a disparaging remark about Park or any remark at all about Dowding, (46) a point also made by Sir Harry Broadhurst, then a Wing-Commander in No.12 Group. (47) Yet Park in 1968 had a different memory. Looking back at an incident that occurred in 1940, when he was Dowding's SASO, he said that Leigh-Mallory came into his office after a meeting with the Commander-in-Chief and complained about his obstinacy. 'He said that he would move heaven and earth to get Dowding sacked from his job'. (48)

The mutual antipathy between Leigh-Mallory and Dowding on the one hand, and between Park and Leigh-Mallory on the other, came to the surface while the Battle of Britain was being fought. This was a disagreement destined to play a major part in the changes of leadership, strategy and tactics at Fighter Command. (49)

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46. Ibid.

47. Interview, Air Chief-Marshal Sir Harry Broadhurst, RAF Club, Piccadilly, 10 November 1989.

48. Wright, p.94, gives an account of Dowding's reaction to learning of this incident in 1968. See also Orange, p.120.

49. See below, especially Chapter 5.

In assessing some of the differences between Dowding and the Air Staff at that time it must be borne in mind that such contests, though less unrelenting, were not unusual. For example, an examination of the career of Air Chief-Marshal Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt and of parts of the correspondence between him and the Air Staff concerning Bomber Command, shows that he was carrying out the duty of a Commander-in-Chief, namely to 'fight for his corner' with a proper vigour. Yet in the eyes of those who received his sharp comments, Ludlow-Hewitt was generally regarded in a more acceptable light than was Dowding.(50)

Thus a brief examination is needed of some of the specific differences between the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command and the Air Council, especially in the eighteen months prior to the outbreak of war. In John Terraine's opinion, these differences resolved themselves into 'a three-pronged argument', which he lists as the question of deployment, the intentions of the Germans and the conflicting needs of the Royal Air Force.(51)

50. Possibly this was because Ludlow-Hewitt was more easily replaceable than Dowding. There were more senior staff with the experience necessary to lead Bomber Command than there were to take over Dowding's role at the rapidly changing Fighter Command between 1937 and 1939. For Ludlow-Hewitt's relations with the Air Ministry, see, for example, AIR 8/243, 1938, *Role of the Royal Air Force in National Defence: Air Staff Policy*. See also Sir Charles Webster and N. Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany, 1939-1945*, 4 vols. (HMSO, 1961), i, Chapters 2 and 3. See also Dr M. Smith, 'Sir Edgar Ludlow-Hewitt and the Expansion of Bomber Command, 1939-40', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute (JRUSI)*, 126, 1, (1981), pp.53-55.

51. Terraine, p.72.

All three became matters of varying controversy. However, Terraine might well have added that at the heart of Dowding's squabbles with the Air Staff lay a basic difference of strategic thought on air power in the later 1930s. The majority of officers there were wedded to a policy which Dowding did not endorse wholeheartedly, namely the Trenchard Bomber Doctrine, in both its parts.

Lord Trenchard, 'The Father of the RAF', had an unequalled influence on the Service from its foundation in 1918. Among his attributes were an indomitable spirit, an ability to inspire and ideas 'dominated by the offensive'.(52) His belief in the importance of aerial bombardment as a strategic weapon permeated his outlook and, by extension, that of the Air Staff. Under his leadership and that of his succeeding disciples, 'until the last declining year of peace at least two new bomber squadrons were formed for every new squadron of fighters'.(53)

His relationship with Dowding was never easy from as early as Royal Flying Corps (RFC) days. When, after the Battle of the Somme in 1916 Dowding asked for squadrons to be relieved periodically, Trenchard referred to him as a 'dismal Jimmy' and spoke of him 'being obsessed by the fear of further casualties'.(54) Dowding was posted back to England, in charge

52. Dean, p.11.

53. Richards and Saunders, i, p.22.

54. A.Boyle, *Trenchard* (London, 1962), p.184. On the same incident see Wright, pp.35-36 and Collier, *Leader of the Few*, p.115.

of Southern Training Brigade, removed from active service. Their mutually tolerant relationship continued as the RAF expanded in the late 1930s, but when the importance of Fighter Command grew after 1937 and, with it, the role of Dowding, Trenchard's Bomber Doctrine was still the lynchpin of policy for the majority of the Air Staff. As will be seen later, Trenchard's influence within both Service and political circles, enabled him to play a significant part in Dowding's dismissal in November 1940.(55)

The first part of the Bomber Doctrine foresaw the devastating power of German air attack on British cities and industrial centres, with attendant damage and breakdown in morale. Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, encouraged the people of Britain to believe this in 1932 when he told Parliament that the man in the street should realise that 'there is no power on earth that can prevent him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through'.(56) Writing in 1935, Air Commodore L.E.O.Charlton, formerly Air Attaché to the USA, envisaged bombers flying in close formation, destroying cities, with fighters unable to prevent the attacks. Fighters, he claimed, would have no superiority in armament, for the bombers

55. See below, Chapter 7.

56. 270 H.C.Deb. 5s, c.632, 10 November 1932. Baldwin added, 'The only defence is offence, which means that you have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy, if you want to save yourselves'.

could be equipped with double guns firing forward, broadside and aft. Their sole advantage would be speed - but even the bombers would be flying at 200 m.p.h.(57)

The threat of the bomber caused men of usually balanced judgement to suffer, then transmit, inordinate fear. 'London for several days will be one vast raving bedlam', one wrote, going on to speak of hospitals being stormed and traffic coming to a halt. 'What of the government at Westminster? It will be swept away by an avalanche of terror'.(58)

There was no doubt in the minds of the Joint Planning Committee in 1936 that the Luftwaffe would attempt to strike 'the knock-out blow' and thus resolve the course of the war within a few days or weeks. 'It is clear that in a war against us', they reported

57. L.E.O.Charlton, *War From the Air* (London, 1935), p.147. Of RAF fighters in 1936 only the Hawker Fury and the Gloster Gauntlet could exceed 200 m.p.h. at maximum level speed. Each aeroplane's armament was two Vickers rifle-calibre machine-guns. Eighteen fighter squadrons were available for operations but only half of these comprised Gauntlets or Furies. See Chaz Bowyer, *Fighter Command* (London, 1980), pp.19-20. At the formation of Fighter Command in July 1936 there were still four Bristol Bulldog squadrons in service, a type that was 'frequently outpaced by the contemporary light day bomber, the Hawker "Hart", during air exercises'. See O.Thetford, 'On Silver Wings', *Aeroplane Monthly*, Part 12 (September, 1991), pp.523-24.

58. See Correlli Barnett, *The Collapse of British Power* (London, 1972), pp.436-37, quoting Major-General J.F.C.Fuller, *Towards Armageddon: The Defence Problem* (London, 1937). Of 'Boney' Fuller, Terraine suggests, p.49, that he 'was passing through a period of searching doubt about democracy's survival capacity'. Smith, p.61, claims that Fuller considered, in Chapter 10, that 'it was the Jewish element in the East End that had panicked in the bombing of 1917, and would do so again in a new war'.

in October 1936, 'the concentration from the first day of the war, of the whole German air offensive ruthlessly against Great Britain would be possible. It would be the most promising way of trying to knock this country out'.(59)

In the same vein, wild estimates of anticipated damage were presented to the Cabinet in December 1938, while the repercussions of the Munich Crisis were actively engaging people's minds. These suggested that if bombs landed in a built-up area, 'then in the first three weeks 465,000 would be totally destroyed and 5,375,000 damaged out of some 14 million houses in the country'.(60)

As a further example of the exaggerated estimates of the effect of air power in war - and a sad commentary on the accuracy of RAF Intelligence - Sir Hugh Seeley told the Supply Committee of the

59. AIR 41/14, The Air Defence of Great Britain (ADGB), 1, The Growth of Fighter Command, July 1936-June 1940, Appendix 6, 'Air Attack on Great Britain', part of 'Appreciation of the Situation in the event of War against Germany', by the Joint Planning Sub-Committee, 26 October 1936 (COS 513 [J.P.]). In view of his later attitude to the efficacy of aerial bombing, it is interesting to note that the RAF's representative on the Sub-Committee was Group-Captain A.Harris, subsequently Commander-in-Chief, Bomber Command.

60. CAB 4/29, 1499B, Committee of Imperial Defence, Sub-Committee on Emergency Reconstruction Report, 16 December 1938. See also J.B.Haldane Air Raid Precautions (London, 1938), p.7 and p.63. Writing for Gollancz, Haldane was, in company with many Socialists and Communists, opposed to rearmament and war. 'This book is intended for the ordinary citizen', he wrote, 'the sort of man and woman who is going to be killed if Britain is raided again from the air'. He predicted that bombers could drop nearly double the 'total weight dropped in Britain during the whole of the last war in half a minute', and that 'the "knock-out blow" might kill 50,000 to 100,000 Londoners'.

House of Commons in May 1938 that by the end of 1939 Germany would possess a first-line strength of 6,000 aircraft, rising to 8,000.(61)

It is easy, from the stronghold of hindsight, to note how far from reality these fears were, but to Service leaders of the inter-war period, they were not necessarily extreme. No one knew for certain what the effects of mass bombing might be. An Air Staff estimate of 1925, based on casualties caused by German air raids between 1914 and 1918, suggested that in London in the first two days of attack, some 3,000 people would be killed and almost 6,000 injured.(62)

Sir John Slessor, formerly Director of Plans (D.Plans) at the Air Ministry, later explained that if heavy German bombing of Britain had taken place, 'then we should have been blameworthy if it had occurred and we had uttered no warning of the possibility or taken steps to guard against it'.(63)

61. 335 H.C.Deb. 5s, c.1752-53, 12 May 1938. 'Germany has the power to produce 400 to 500 a month', Seeley claimed. 'The latest of these schemes will bring us in two years' time up to 2,700 front-line machines'. Ironically, in 1939 the Luftwaffe possessed no long-range heavy bomber. M.Williamson, *The Luftwaffe, 1939-1945* (New York, 1986), p.18.

62. Quoted in Webster and Frankland, i, pp.62-63, referring to a Report by the Committee on Air Raid Precautions, 6 July 1925; General Staff Memo, 14 October 1925 and Air Staff Memo, 24 October 1925. See also B.Liddell Hart, *The Defence of Britain* (London, 1939), pp.153-54. For a critical assessment of the criteria governing the Air Staff's estimates, see Air Vice-Marshal E.J.Kingston-McCloughry, 'The Strategic Air Offensive', *JRUSI*, 107, 2 (1962), pp.61-64. 'No realistic test or exercise was made in bomb damage before the outbreak of the second world war', (p.61).

63. Slessor, p.151.

To reinforce this point of view, Lord Douglas, then Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (ACAS) wrote, of the Spanish Civil War, that the Air Ministry were affected both by the bombing of troops and of Guernica. 'The results perhaps over-impressed us and probably had some effect on our attitude at the time of Munich'.(64)

The second part of Trenchard's Doctrine, in the view of the Bomber Lobby, was to match threat with threat. Therefore the aim of the Royal Air Force was to retaliate against aerial attacks on the United Kingdom by launching raids on an enemy, hitting especially at the economy. The bomber was invested with a deterrent power far exceeding its actual ability at the time. In 1938, Trenchard told the House of Lords that the only thing which would stop war-makers was the knowledge that if they attacked they would be hit harder in return.(65) As Trenchard's biographer pointed out, his views on strategy 'had the hallmark of simplicity'.(66)

In a sense, Dowding's appointment to the leadership of the newly formed Fighter Command in 1936 was equivalent to being given captaincy of the Second Eleven. At the time, in the world of military aviation, the bomber was supreme and it was anticipated that, in any future war, fighters would play no more than an

64. Douglas Papers; the Papers of Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, Imperial War Museum Department of Documents, London, File 2, Notes sent by Lord Douglas to Robert Wright, 13 June 1963. On the same point, see U.Bialer, 'Humanization of Air Warfare in British Foreign Policy on the Eve of the Second World War, *Journal of Contemporary History(JCH)*, 13, 1(1978), pp.79-96.

65. 112 H.L.Deb. 5s, p.235, c.1 and p.237, c.1, debate, 15 March 1939.

66. Boyle, p.706.

ancillary role. However, the developments of Radio Direction Finding (RDF) and the revolution in design, speed and armament of monoplane fighters altered the balance. These changes naturally also increased the importance of Dowding's position. The spotlight fell more brightly on his Command, thus stressing the significance of the nature of his relationship with the Air Staff. (67)

Consequently Dowding's Fighter Doctrine was propounded, especially from 1938, together with his unwavering belief in the necessity to protect the Home Base, 'The best defence of the country is the Fear of the Fighter' he wrote to Sir Arthur Street, Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS) at the Air Ministry, in September 1939. If Britain were strong in fighters, he continued, she would probably never be attacked in force. Limited strength would draw attacks which would gradually be stopped, but only after great damage had been done. Then came his most profound worry, which was that a shortage of fighters would lead to unstoppable attacks, 'and the productive capacity of the country will be virtually destroyed'. In that event, Dowding predicted, other parts of the RAF - and by that he was referring particularly to Bomber Command - would 'become a wasting asset' and maintaining them would have been 'a fruitless sacrifice'.

67. Terraine, p.71, refers to a 'dramatic transformation' in Dowding's status. For a map of Radio Direction Finding stations established by 1939, see Richards and Saunders, i, p.153. For early developments of Hurricanes and Spitfires, see, for example, Penrose, pp.50-51 and 68-69.

At the end of his homily he pointed out, with an argument which failed to persuade all of the Bomber Lobby at the Air Ministry, that 'the continued existence of the nation and all its services, depends upon the Royal Navy and Fighter Command'.(68)

All of Dowding's strategy was turned towards the goal of building a complete system of aerial defence for Britain and in this, by the outbreak of war, he had succeeded to an extent that no other commander probably could have achieved. But this concentration upon a laager defence was not in line with the thinking of those on the Air Council who felt, at heart, that fighters were no more than a placebo for the public. They believed that bombers alone would bring the enemy to his knees and thereby obtain victory.

'It is not enough to avoid losing a war', suggested an Air Staff note in November 1938, shortly after the Munich Crisis had uncovered some of the RAF's gross deficiencies in fighter strength. 'We have got to be able to win it; and we can never win a war merely by protecting ourselves'. The report then turned to a comparison with the boxing-ring, saying that there would be no victory for a boxer who only parried blows. He needed a big punch of his own, 'and he must be able to keep on punching until his opponent is out'.(69)

68. AIR 16/255, Fighter Strength - Policy (1939), Dowding to Sir Arthur Street, Permanent Under-Secretary (PUS), the Air Ministry, 25 September 1939.

69. AIR 8/243, Air Staff note, 26 November 1938.

In boxing terms, Dowding was an astute counter-puncher, learning to husband and employ limited forces in a defensive battle aimed at preventing the Luftwaffe from achieving mastery in British skies. The nature of the task which he was set to solve prevented him from taking a direct involvement in the strategy of the Bomber Lobby, which was firmly entrenched in Whitehall. Yet, of course, their basic argument was sound. Wars cannot be won by fighters; they may be won by bombers.

* * *

A second, though related example of Dowding's differences with the Air Staff during the later 1930s came from their respective attitudes towards the number of squadrons needed by Fighter Command to fulfil its tasks. The matter became a running battle over several years, both before and after the watershed of Munich.

In brief, when worries were expressed in January 1938 that only 38 squadrons were available for home defence, the Air Staff were prepared to accept the figure. Dowding, however, and the Home Defence Committee (HDC) were not, bearing in mind particularly the limitations of the biplane fighter when set against the performance of the emerging monoplane bombers being built in Germany. (70)

70. CAB 13/7, Home Defence Committee 256, Sub-Committee on the Re-Orientation of the Air Defence System of Great Britain. 'Ideal' Scheme for the Air Defence of Great Britain - Possible Economies Report, 2 February 1938.

By March, Dowding believed that there should be not less than 45 squadrons, yet in July Air-Commodore Slessor, then Deputy Director of Plans (D.D.Plans) at the Air Ministry and thus an officer of great influence, (71) considered that 35 squadrons of fighters - 28 in the line and seven in reserve - should be the minimum home defence strength. Again, Fighter Command, with spreading responsibilities, wanted more. (72)

The crisis over Czechoslovakia in late September concentrated the minds of politicians and Service officers very rapidly. At once, the needs of the Royal Air Force, so long neglected by governmental policies, became the centre of a decision for swift expansion.

On 1 October Britain's fighter strength was 406 machines. The sobering thought for those who made a distinction between numbers and quality, nevertheless, was that, of the total, only 70 were Hurricanes and fourteen Spitfires, with the latter at that time being non-operational. Their 322 biplane fighters, of which the most effective were 84 Gladiators, could barely catch, let alone

71. Smith, pp.38-40, considered the Plans department 'the major progenitor of theory and forward thinking'. In his view the relationship between the Deputy Director of Plans and the CAS was 'one of the most crucial in the entire organisation' and the former had 'more influence than his opposite numbers in the other services'. See also Slessor, Chapters VII and IX for his autobiographical recollections of this period.

72. See AIR 20/313, 1938-41, Strength and Deployment of Fighter Squadrons.

shoot down, the contemporary Luftwaffe bombers.(73) Dowding, writing to the Deputy Chief of the Air Staff (DCAS) on 12 October, commented, 'I should consider 41 squadrons upon the presence of which I could rely would be adequate for Home Defence purposes'.(74)

Leaders of the RAF, particularly after 1936, followed a double strategy as the power and value of monoplane fighters grew. Firstly, in forward planning, they hoped to create a strike-force of heavy bombers able to devastate an enemy's economic power. Secondly, through expanding Fighter Command, they intended to inflict unacceptable losses on any attacking force, which, thereby, would be compelled to call off the offensive.

After Munich, more of the Air Staff came to realise not so much that their creed of the power of the bomber was over-optimistic as that there was a need for a stronger force to defend the British Isles. This requirement arose directly from the fear of

73. For fighter deliveries made in 1938, see AIR 19/524, Fighter aircraft deliveries, 1939. For fighter strength in 1938, see AIR 8/218, Strength Returns of Metropolitan Force Squadrons, 1938.

74. AIR 16/255, Dowding to Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, 12 October 1938.

bombing on a mass scale by a Luftwaffe whose numbers and capabilities had been greatly exaggerated by Air Force Intelligence. (75)

Faced by a pressure to build up the RAF at great speed, with fewer resources than required, the Air Staff had no little difficulty in reconciling the dual need. The dichotomy can be deduced from statements made by Sir Kingsley Wood in the immediate aftermath of the Munich Crisis. In the first, he told the Air Staff that 'the strong are not those who can merely defend themselves but those who have the will and the means to give, in the last resort, the backing of force to their influence in the world. This we cannot do if we are inferior in air power, which means striking power'. (76) However, on 10 November he assured Parliament that he proposed to provide 'the highest priority to the strengthening of our fighter force, that force which is designed to meet the invading bomber in the air'. (77)

75. See AIR 8/243, 26 November 1938. The document admitted that 'there has been a tendency in the past to overstate the case that "the bomber will always get through", and perhaps also to lay too much stress on the claim that the counter-offensive is the only effective means of defence in the air'. The developments of monoplane fighters, with great speed and firepower, sharpened the case against deterrence by bombing. What the Air Ministry failed to allow for adequately, however, was that what could happen to unescorted German bombers over Britain could also be suffered by unescorted RAF bombers over Germany. For a full background to the problem of information available to Britain about the emerging Luftwaffe, see Wesley K. Wark, 'British Intelligence on the German Air Force and Aircraft Industry, 1933-1939', *Historical Journal (HJ)*, 25, 3 (1982), pp.627-48.

76. AIR 8/277, The Strength of the Bomber Force in relation to the principle of parity, Memo by the Air Staff, 2 November 1938.

77. 341 H.C. Deb., 5s, c.351, 10 November 1938.

It is noteworthy that even at a time when Dowding's Command was the prime candidate for expansion, considerably greater financial allocation was given to bombers. Under Scheme M the cost of fighters was estimated at £45 million; bombers were allocated £175 million. (78)

By March 1939 Sir Kingsley Wood spoke in the Commons of 'building up what I would call a balanced Air Force'. Britain's strategic policy of relying on the counter-offensive, he claimed, had not been abandoned, because it was a vital part of any sound system of defence. However, the argument that the bomber would always get through had been over-emphasised and, with it, the supremacy of the offensive. (79)

Although rapid advances in the production and provision of monoplane fighters were made from late 1938 to December 1939, by which time the war had started, Dowding still did not believe that his forces were adequate. Nonetheless, it is apparent from the figures that a great effort was made by the Air Council; awarding credit for the expansion solely to the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command, is no fair assessment. (80)

78. AIR 8/240, Programme of development of Scheme 'M', 1938. For details, see Smith, Table VIII, p.355.

79. 344 H.C.Deb., 5s, c.2388, 9 March 1939. Kingsley Wood added that 'security of the base is one of the vital principles of war and it would be just as foolish to concentrate on the offensive and neglect defence as it would be to do the reverse'.

80. See AIR 16/116, Operational Requirements - Fighter Command Squadrons Available for War, which shows, for example, that on 1 May 1939, seven squadrons of Spitfires and twelve of Hurricanes were available. The figure had risen to thirteen squadrons of each type by 1 January 1940. From January to December 1939, production for home and export was 586 Hurricanes and 435 Spitfires. See AIR 19/524, Fighter Aircraft Deliveries, 1939.

Yet the tone of Dowding's feelings on the matter may be judged from his Battle of Britain Despatch. Dissatisfaction broke through. 'I wrote on the 16th September, 1939, a letter to the Air Ministry', he claimed. 'In the letter I pointed out that the Air Staff Estimates of the number of Fighter Squadrons necessary for the defence of the country was 52, and that on the outbreak of war I had the equivalent of 34 (allowing for the fact that some Auxiliary Squadrons were only partially trained and equipped)'. (81)

The controversy between him and the Air Council over fighter numbers endured throughout the remainder of his time at Fighter Command.

* * *

A further area of dissension for Dowding concerned the provision of aerodromes, together with the construction of concrete runways. Harold Balfour, the Under-Secretary of State for Air, remembered some of the arguments when he wrote of the Air Staff belief in 1938 that 'there was no need to plan for hard runways. The idea of training on anything except a grass field was a sin in thought against the true faith of flying instruction'. (82) This view, in Balfour's opinion, epitomised the attitude of several leaders whose thought and planning had advanced little since their own flying days in combat before 1918.

81. AIR 8/863, p.4544, paragraph 16. The background to the figure of 52 squadrons, which was first proposed in 1923, is shown in Marquess of Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny* (London, 1943), Chapter II, 'Fifty-Two Metropolitan Squadrons'.

82. Balfour, p.104.

Dowding realised the need for all-weather surfaces so that his modern monoplane fighters, heavier and faster than the biplanes, would not be grounded in times of poor weather, thus putting at risk his plans for constant defence of the United Kingdom.(83)

As late as the end of February, 1939, Air Vice-Marshal W.Welsh, Air Member for Supply and Organisation, (AMSO) claimed that concrete runways were often unnecessary. He raised the objection that they were difficult to camouflage, a reason which failed to impress Dowding. After discussions within the Air Ministry, however, the attitude changed and by the middle of March it was suggested that by the following winter, all fighter aerodromes would be provided with concrete runways.(84)

An effort was made to achieve this and there was some progress by the early stages of the war. In reality, the operation of

83. For example, compare the Hawker Fury, with a maximum speed of 223 m.p.h. and a maximum take-off weight of 3,620 lb. with the Hawker Hurricane, whose comparable figures were 316 m.p.h. and 6,040 lb. See Bill Gunston, *Fighters, 1914-1945* (London, 1978), pp.54-55 and 74-75.

84. AIR 6/37, Secretary of State's Progress Meetings on RAF Expansion Measures, 24 January-20 March, 1939, Meetings held on 21 February, 28 February and 14 March, 1939. At the first meeting, Welsh raised the additional objection of high cost - an average of £70,000 for changing one fighter aerodrome. See also AIR 20/251, 1939-40, Deployment of fighter squadrons and provision of runways, taxi-ing tracks and dispersal points at fighter aerodromes, for Minutes of conferences held at the Air Ministry on 28 April and 29 June, 1939, to discuss matters, at which Dowding listed 'wet' and 'dry' aerodromes.

fighters from aerodromes in the south of England during the Battle of Britain was made easier by the generally dry weather of that period.(85)

* * *

A small, yet telling example of Dowding's care for his pilots - and the occasion of another difference with the Air Staff - arose from his desire that men should be well protected in their aircraft. Bearing in mind the scarcity value of pilots to Fighter Command, both his concern and sense of investment were understandable.

In 1938 a decision was taken that during the early months of the following year fighters would be equipped with an external armoured glass windscreen; also, by September 1939 a sheet of armour plate would be fitted behind the cockpit seat to protect the pilot's back. Dowding, never reticent over recounting past battles with the Air Ministry, remembered the discussions and commented, years later, that his request for bullet-proof glass

85. In the opinion of Dr. Montgomery-Hyde, historian of the Air Ministry, 'Dowding strongly advocated the use of concrete runways, but he was overruled by colleagues in the Air Ministry, who favoured grass. He rightly knew that concrete runways had to come and if they had been ready for the Battle of Britain it might well have made a substantial difference'. Letter, Dr.H.Montgomery-Hyde, 17 December 1988. Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, pp.30-236, gives excellent background detail on twenty aerodromes used during the battle, showing that a number still had no concrete runways by July 1940. For weather of that period, see Hough and Richards, Appendix 1. This shows that, during a period of 83 days from 10 July to 30 September, during which the main daylight battle was fought, there were showers, light rain or rain on only 25 days. Clear, or fine weather occurred on 43 days. Other days were mainly cloudy, but dry.

to be fitted to Hurricanes and Spitfires was met with laughter, as if he had demanded 'something grotesquely impossible'. He said that his reply was, 'If Chicago gangsters can have bullet-proof glass in their cars I can't see any reason why my pilots should not have the same'.(86)

Dowding's third area of overall disagreement with the Air Ministry stemmed particularly from their respective views of the strategic use to be made of Fighter Command. The difference lay in the separate pressures exerted on each side.

In the eyes of the Commander-in-Chief his squadrons existed primarily, if not exclusively, for the air defence of Great Britain. In the years prior to the war he had interpreted that responsibility as largely to provide cover for two of the vital areas which lay within the radius of attack from unescorted German bombers, flying from their homeland. The first of these encompassed London and south-east England, where he planned to deploy the fighters of No.11 Group. The second was the wider geographical area of the midlands and the north, particularly industrial centres, where No.12 Group was to be used. In Dowding's view, his Command would be exercised to the limit in offering protection to those areas, especially in view of

86. See Wright, p.72 and F.Mason, *The Hawker Hurricane* (London, 1962), p.36. See also R.Cross, *Spitfire* (Cambridge, 1971), p.32, for a clear photograph of an early windscreen with external armoured glass panel, and, p.53, a list of cockpit protection for pilots. The introduction of these devices, strongly supported by Dowding, saved the lives of many pilots.

an insufficient number of fighters at his disposal. Any further demands on Fighter Command, he believed, could be met only if he were provided with greater resources.(87)

By September 1939 and the coming of the war, the expanding defensive role of Fighter Command was recognised by the formation of No.13 Group and the planning of No.10 Group. The latter, in time, would defend the south-west of England, beyond Portsmouth and Southampton, while the former was created primarily to cover the wide sweep of coastal Britain lying to the north of the area covered by No.12 Group. This showed the existing concern over providing an aerial guard for naval establishments in Scotland, stretching from the Firth of Forth to Scapa Flow.(88)

This extra responsibility for assisting in the defence of the Royal Navy's bases at Scapa was increased in the late summer. Fighter Command was also required to give protection to coastal shipping, especially the trade plying the east coast. Then the decision was taken to add the city of Belfast, a large industrial centre, to the list. The difficulties involved in these requests were appreciated by the Cabinet, as is shown by a Memorandum

87. See AIR 20/252, Air Requirements of the Field Force, Dowding to Under-Secretary for Air, 7 July 1939. When Dowding learned that ten of his squadrons might be allocated to France, he wrote that 'the air defence of Great Britain will be gravely imperilled ... If 10 Regular squadrons were withdrawn the remaining resources would be altogether inadequate for the defence of this country'.

88. No.13 Group was formed on 1 August 1939, under the terms of Scheme M. No.10 Group became operational on 13 July 1940. See Hough and Richards, pp.64 and 115-16. See also AIR 20/393, Planning and Expansion of Air Defences, 1939, pp.57-63.

produced on 6 September by the Chiefs of Staff (COS) Committee. They saw the need for Fighter Command's brief to cover Scapa Flow, but felt unable to propose that the 'aircraft defence of Great Britain, which is still short of fifteen squadrons, should be further depleted by taking two for Scapa'.(89)

As war started, Dowding had to face the fact that what he once considered to be a commitment to protect, in the main, London, the south-east, the industrial midlands and the north of England, had grown to a far wider responsibility. He was required to offer protection to the nation's factories, especially those producing aircraft; to ensure the safety of the system of supply and distribution, particularly at the major ports; to provide some cover for Royal Navy shore bases, especially Scapa Flow; to offer cover, in spite of his feeling that this was the Navy's task, to coastal shipping; to have one squadron ready to defend Belfast; and to provide fighters to protect the Field Force in France.(90) For this multitude of duties, the planned strength of Fighter Command had risen to 57 squadrons. The reality, on 3 September 1939, was that Dowding commanded a force of 39 squadrons, of which 25 were Regular, and fourteen Auxiliary. To compound his difficulties, four squadrons immediately flew to France, as previously arranged.(91)

89. CAB 66/1, War Cabinet Memoranda, 1939-40, W.P.(39)8, Air Defence of Scapa, Memorandum by Chiefs of Staff Committee, 6 September 1939. See also AIR 16/190, Fighter Policy, September 1939- May 1940, pp.13-16.

90. Ibid, p.19.

91. See AIR 16/116, figures for 31 August 1939.

An argument can be advanced that, on occasion, Dowding gave the impression of wanting to select which duties his Command would undertake, showing an air of paternalism, verging on ownership, towards his men and machines. Although possessing an almost messianic sense of mission towards the defence of the Home Base, he was still the servant of the Air Ministry. With hindsight, the correctness of his burning belief in the need to retain fighters for combat over Britain, according to his carefully prepared plan, has received extensive praise.(92) Nevertheless, the burdens laid on the Air Staff at the time must be recognised. They were immediately affected by requirements from Government and from the needs of the other two Services. Blaming them for the problems laid at the door of the RAF is easy, but unjust; they were servants of masters with whose decisions they did not always concur.

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92. See, for example, Terraine, pp.150-52, Deighton, pp.61-64 and Wright, pp.103-07.

PART FOUR: THE FRENCH CONNECTION

Nowhere did the divergences over Fighter Command's leadership and strategy show more clearly than in the difficulties and differences which divided Dowding from the Air Council on the question of fighters for France. The argument lasted from the reappraisals made after the Munich Crisis, until the end of the French Campaign in June 1940. The main *casus belli* was the extent to which Fighter Command should be instructed to give support to the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France and to the French themselves.

The claim has been advanced that Dowding fought virtually single-handed to retain his squadrons in Britain, an attitude formed by his prescience that they would be needed to defend the mainland of the United Kingdom when the inevitable German air offensive was launched.⁽⁹³⁾ The disagreement developed during two phases, growing more urgent with the passage of time. The first period stretched from the preparations made during 1939 and lasted until the eve of the German Blitzkrieg in the West on 10 May 1940. Following immediately, the second phase lasted until the collapse of France in late June. However, the claim of Dowding's single opposition does less than justice to the efforts of some other senior officers.

93. See, for example, Wright, especially Chapters 5 and 6.

At the root of the problem lay British mistrust of entanglement in a war on the European mainland and, when such an involvement became inevitable, an unwillingness to commit forces on a large scale.(94) Nevertheless, it was obvious that RAF aircraft would have to be part of the force despatched, both to fulfil the Air Ministry's expectations of the efficacy of bombing targets in Germany(95) and also to protect British ground forces. As a matter of government policy, the planned sending of four squadrons from Fighter Command was far from unreasonable, a decision approached by the Air Ministry with guarded charity and towards which Dowding was distinctly hostile.

The creation of a Fighter Command whose defence was based on a close liaison between Radio Direction Finding stations, Controllers and the squadrons themselves had undoubted strengths for the protection of the United Kingdom. However, the system evolved under Dowding's leadership also limited the Command's strategic use, although this weakness could be laid at the door of the Air Council, who had altered the concept of the indivisibility of air power when they created separate Commands

94. Terraine, p.63, comments that 'the Army's dislike of the French alliance and the Continental commitment was in no small part due to a dread of once more becoming pawns on a French board'. The background to British foreign policy at this time is explained clearly in Taylor, *English History*, pp.439-51, underlining Britain's mistrust of Russia ('No alliance has been pursued less enthusiastically'; p.448) and inability to help the Poles ('They had no teeth for this purpose'; p.443).

95. For a summary of Bomber Command's proposed role, see Terraine, Appendix A, 'Western Air Plans, September 1, 1939'. Reasons for the choice of the Ruhr as a target are shown in AIR 41/40, *The RAF in the Bombing Offensive against Germany (BOAG)*, ii, Restricted bombing, September 1939- May 1941, p.36.

in 1936.(96) If the alliance of Great Britain and France were to be utilised completely against Germany, then such a potent weapon as Fighter Command would need to be employed to the full. Slessor, an able strategist, foresaw the static role that could be forced on Spitfires and Hurricanes when he wrote, in April 1939 that, 'Unless we can make some arrangement for operating fighters from French bases, we might be faced in the initial stage of such a war with the spectacle of five or six hundred good short-range fighters sitting in England unable to contribute at all to the issue in the Low Countries - a struggle on which the subsequent fate of England might ultimately depend'. He pointed out that 'our quite natural and proper obsession' with the fear of a 'knock-out' blow could lead to an insular outlook. This would give little help to France, whose defeat could be followed by heavy attacks on Britain.(97)

As Chief of the Air Staff, Newall felt more than most the double pressures exerted on Fighter Command when war drew near. He appreciated that the four squadrons allocated to the Field Force represented barely more than a token gesture of support for the

96. The reasons for the decision to create separate Commands in 1936 are shown in AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, pp.15-23 and 30-34, and in AIR 41/40 BOAG, i, Pre-War Evolution of Bomber Command, 1917-1939, pp.110A-110E. See also Webster and Frankland, i, p.83, who believe that 'It made still wider the gulf between attack and defence ... combined operations were made more difficult. Joint tactical planning was neglected'. A contrary view is taken by Derek Wood, co-author of *The Narrow Margin*. See *The Battle Re-Thought*, edited by H.Probert and S.Cox (London, 1991), p.4, in which he states that 'this centralization was vital; one command, one purpose'.

97. AIR 20/220, 1938-1939, Deployment of fighter squadrons, Director of Plans to Director of Organisation, 6 April 1939.

Army and realised the urgency of requests made by the French for more support from the RAF, particularly as they knew the weaknesses of their own *Armée de l'Air*. Yet at the same time he was aware of Fighter Command's prime responsibility for the defence of the British mainland, a task which could be carried out only through the operation of the controlled system set up under Dowding.

Newall, in May 1939, resisted undertakings being given to the French in advance to despatch more fighters to France. 'Any further reinforcement of that sector of the allied air front in France', he wrote, 'must be a matter for decision by the Cabinet in the light of the circumstances at the time'.(98) And yet, at the same time, Newall planned for a further six squadrons of the best fighters to be put on a mobile basis from early 1940, so that they might be despatched to France if needed.

Dowding's objections to this policy lasted unremittingly through September and October. 'The secure base must be the foundation for all our war plans', he warned sternly within a fortnight of the outbreak of hostilities, 'and, at the present moment, our base is dangerously insecure'. However, the demands made on the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command were at least equalled, if not exceeded, by those aimed at the Chief of the Air Staff and the Air Council, as is shown clearly by the correspondence between Dowding and his masters at the time.(99)

98. CAB 53/49, Committee of Imperial Defence, Chiefs of Staff Committee, COS 912, Memorandum by CAS, 13 May 1939.

99. See, for example, AIR 16/255, Dowding to Kingsley Wood, 12 September 1939 and Air Ministry to Dowding, 21 September 1939.

In this matter, Dowding's reputation for obstinacy and an unwillingness to co-operate readily was drawn into sharper focus. Concerning his attitude towards bringing his Command up to the planned number of squadrons, Denis Richards writes of his 'vigorous, sustained and absolutely justified campaign', but then adds, 'in this, though he often seemed unaware of it, he had the Air Staff with him all the way'.(100) His reaction to other senior staff could be combative. In September 1939 Douglas had to approach Dowding over a proposal to send more fighters to France and 'bearded Dowding in his office in Bentley Priory. I stated the Air Ministry's case, and, almost as I expected, I got a smart rebuff. Dowding was rightly concerned about nourishing his own strength, and when it came to doing that he was adamant'.(101) His attitude was not forgiven by some of those who had suffered from his tongue and pen, and they stored it as ammunition for a future campaign.(102)

Yet Dowding's supporters have painted a portrait of a lone campaigner, virtually without allies, struggling to ensure the aerial security of Britain. Wright wrote of 'the long and lonely struggle that he was to have to wage during those first eight months of the war to maintain, let alone build up, what he felt to be sufficient forces for the air defence of the country'.(103)

100. Hough and Richards, pp. 76-77.

101. Lord Douglas of Kirtleside, *Years of Command* (London, 1966), p.51.

102. Terraine, p.77, refers to 'Dowding's outspoken disputations' with the Air Staff. The 'future campaign' refers to the moves to replace Dowding, from September to December, 1940. See below, especially Chapters 5-7.

103. Wright, p.87.

Such a claim does not present a balanced view of the feelings of the time. The reality was that both Dowding and the Air Staff were less than prepared to weaken the defensive arm of the Royal Air Force; the difference was one of degree. The Air Ministry were, more particularly, servants of military and political demands to give adequate cover to the BEF and to demonstrate that Britain was an ally of France not in words alone.(104)

* * *

The different appreciations of the role of Fighter Command, made by those at the heart of Britain's air defences, were sharpened by a cause other than the need to retain in the United Kingdom a basic number of squadrons required for the protection of the Home Base, with no reductions for any other duties. This cause was an awareness, a deeply worrying omen in view of the

104. See AIR 16/255, Newall to Dowding, 5 October 1939. The wider pressures on the Air Staff, as opposed to Dowding's single-mindedness are displayed here. The CAS concluded, 'Finally let me repeat I am not preparing to sell Fighter Command to the French. I am merely asking you to take the necessary steps to ensure that if we are in danger of losing the war in France through lack of fighters (a situation which I do not think is likely to arise), we shall not find ourselves caught unprepared'. For more evidence of Newall's resistance to the 'bleeding' of Fighter Command, see AIR 20/293, pp.87-88.

forthcoming struggle, of the weaknesses of the French Air Force.(105) Dowding mistrusted the abilities of the French to fight a war in the air, disturbed both by their pessimistic outlook and the lack of an integrated system of defence comparable with the one devised to protect the United Kingdom.(106)

This mistrust was fuelled by personal experience. In 1939 he flew to Lille to see the working of their defensive system. The meeting was preceded by a long luncheon at a public restaurant during which Dowding, an abstemious man, drank far less than several French commanders. He was then taken to a basement, where the system was unveiled. It consisted of a French airman seated beside a public telephone, taking occasional calls, then entering chalked arrows on a squared blackboard. Dowding, angered with disappointment, could barely wait to return to his aircraft with his Personal Assistant.(107)

105. Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle* (London, 1969), pp.70-71, refers to General Vuillemin, Commander-in-Chief of l'Armée de l'Air as 'an elderly bomber pilot not over-endowed with dynamism'. *The Private Diaries of Paul Baudouin*, translated by Sir Charles Petrie (London, 1948), p.18, offers Baudouin's description of him as 'a nonentity as usual, but with no pretensions to be anything else'. D.Wood and D.Dempster, *The Narrow Margin* (London, 1961), p.187, give French fighter strength in September 1939 as 442 machines, all of which were inferior to the Me.109. They attribute the poor French position at least partly to the nationalisation of the aircraft industry under Blum's government in 1936. For further details, see P.Lamarche, 'The French Air Force Today', in the *Aeroplane*, 7 September 1939.

106. General Vuillemin's pessimism in 1938 after visiting the Luftwaffe was later recollected by the then French Foreign Minister, Georges Bonnet. 'Or le général Vuillemin, rentrant d'Allemagne où il a été invité par Goering, est catégorique. "Notre aviation est complètement surclassé par celle de nos voisins ... deux semaines après le début de la guerre, il n'y aura plus un seul avion français en l'air"'. Georges Bonnet, 'Pourquoi j'ai approuvé les accords de Munich', *Historama*, 238 (Paris, 1971), pp.61-88 (p.61).

107. Ironside interview, 17 August 1989.

A generally accepted figure for the number of aircraft possessed by *l'Armée de l'Air* just prior to the opening of the German offensive in 1940 is not easy to discover, as some totals disguise the inclusion of many obsolescent machines. This was to prove a crucial factor in battle because, in Terraine's estimate, of the 170 bombers and 614 fighters ready *en ligne* on 1 February 1940, only 37 of the former and 523 of the latter had been built within the previous two years. On 10 May the probable figures were, on strength, 663 fighters, with 465 operational and 793 bombers/reconnaissance aircraft, of which 459 were operational. (108)

Through discussions and observations, the Air Staff were painfully aware of their ally's failings - factory production, squadron organisation, lack of RDF defence, problems of spares and replacements and fighter performance - all fell well below the standards of the Royal Air Force. Thus, an even greater burden was destined to fall on Fighter Command when the main battle in the West opened. The French machines, supported by the comparatively meagre, yet most valuable RAF contingents, were faced by a Luftwaffe force of almost four and a half thousand aircraft, of which about one thousand seven hundred were fighters or dive-bombers. (109)

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108. Terraine, pp.119-20. See also C.Dunning, *L'Armée de l'Air, 1939-40* (London, 1989), p.22. For more detail and assessment of various types of French fighter, see Gunston, pp.70-73. For French bombers, see B.Cooper, *The Story of the Bomber, 1914-1945* (London, 1978), pp.69-71.

109. Wood and Dempster, Appendix 16. For a general background of pre-war Anglo-French co-operation, see N.H.Gibbs, *Grand Strategy, vol.i, Rearmament Policy* (HMSO, 1976), Chapters XVI and XVII, pp.607-88.

When the blow fell on 10 May, within a few days, or, as some would claim, a few hours, the worst fears of the Air Staff were realised. For example, in the words of Wood and Dempster, 'the French Air Force was a hollow shell which shattered into a thousand pieces at the first blow', a judgement far more of an organisation than of individual pilots, many of whom fought with great courage.(110) This was a catalyst as predictions and fears were turned to an unwelcome reality over the succeeding weeks. Events moved at a rapid, even bewildering pace, as the Luftwaffe marked its superiority over the battlefield not so much by numbers as by tactical application.

On 10 May the Royal Air Force possessed 45 fighter squadrons ready for operations in the United Kingdom, and six in France. As soon as the German offensive opened, losses in Allied fighters, euphemistically called 'wastage', were heavy and requests for reinforcements arrived without respite. Some were put by the French, who could not comprehend why Britain was unwilling to invest an underemployed resource;(111) others came

110. Wood and Dempster, p.186. See also Horne, pp.195-96, who comments, 'Overcome by impatience at the lethargy of the French Air Force, Air Marshal Barratt finally took matters into his own hands'. Air Chief-Marshal Sir Arthur Barratt was Commander-in-Chief, British Air Forces in France (BAFF).

111. For a full examination of the problems of Anglo-French co-operation, see John C.Cairns, 'Great Britain and the Fall of France: A Study in Allied Disunity', *JMH*, 27, 4 (1955), pp.365-410. The question of aircraft is examined particularly on pp.378-79. "History will then doubtless record," Reynaud commented over and over again, "that the Battle of France was lost for want of aeroplanes".

from the Army in France, (112) and others again from Air/Vice-Marshal C. Blount, Air Officer Commanding, the RAF Component. Air Marshal Sir Victor Goddard, then a staff officer with Blount, later recalled the struggle to obtain assistance from the United Kingdom. 'Officially, Dowding, as C-in-C, Fighter Command, was interested in only two limited aspects of the air battle in France; first as a means of getting his squadrons experienced in the skills and tactics of air fighting; second, as a means of studying the methods and mentality of the enemy in the air'. He added that Dowding's single concern was to safeguard Great Britain. 'Indeed it was his destiny to ensure it'. (113)

The assistance demanded was not only for replacements of aircraft lost, but also for the change in strategic policy that certain members of the Air Staff had favoured, yet Dowding feared most, namely, a greater 'battlefield presence', with an acceptance that probably the battle to save Britain was being fought in the skies over France and Belgium.

For him, the persistent demands on Fighter Command to send additional aircraft to France, combined with the rate of

112. The feeling of troops is shown in Anon., *The Diary of a Staff Officer* (London, 1941), p.18. See also Lord Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: The Reckoning* (London, 1969), pp.104-05. Later, in June and July, a few clashes occurred between soldiers and RAF personnel. Sir Brian Horrocks, *A Full Life* (London, 1960), p.96, comments, 'At this stage of the war unless the soldier actually saw our planes over his head he would not believe that they were operating at all', partly proof of the aeroplane's new importance, which he acknowledged by adding that 'without the R.A.F. we should never have got back from France at all'.

113. V. Goddard, *Skies to Dunkirk* (London, 1982), pp.135-36.

wastage of squadrons in action, promised doom both for the RAF and the nation.(114) This period has offered, for some, signal proof of Dowding's greatness in retaining Fighter Command for what he saw as its prime purpose.(115) Others, nevertheless, felt the severity of Dowding's strictures; they thought of him increasingly as tetchy and unco-operative, narrow in outlook.(116)

* * *

Dowding's response to pleas for help was a novel exercise in strategical thinking. He suggested that oil targets in Germany should be bombed for the prime reason that such attacks would bring retaliatory raids on mainland Britain, where Fighter Command was equipped to meet them; his fighters would be used, but over his territory and under his control. His worst alarms were soon transmitted to paper. 'The Hurricane tap is now turned full on', he wrote to the Vice-Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS) on 14 May 'and you will not be able to resist the pressure to send Hurricanes to France until I have been bled white'.(117)

114. See AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, Appendix 16, Dowding to Under-Secretary of State for Air, 24 May 1940. In France, the RAF had lost 250 Hurricanes in ten days; this was a loss rate of 25%.

115. See, for example, Wright, p.123; Deighton, pp.61-64; Terraine, pp.173-74 and Taylor, *English History*, p.497.

116. In the view of Lord Ironside, Commander-in-Chief, Home forces, Dowding 'does not understand that the men we are extricating are very valuable, even if we did not take the sentimental side of abandoning the B.E.F. into account'. Five days later, Ironside noted 'He is very much inclined to regard himself as completely outside the operations in France, which is quite impossible'. *The Ironside Diaries, 1937-1940*, edited by R.Macleod and D.Kelly (London, 1962), pp.346 and 351; entries for 30 May and 4 June, 1940.

117. AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, Appendix 10, Dowding to Vice-Chief of the Air Staff (VCAS), 14 May 1940.

It was easy to criticise Dowding, the Air Staff and the Cabinet, all of whom appreciated only too well the two-edged sword of responsibility here. In spite of the need for further assistance to France, a corporate unease was growing that the Germans would be victorious - and within weeks - and then there would be little left of Fighter Command to defend the Home Base.

Dowding was therefore present, for the first two items only, at a Cabinet meeting on 15 May when the question of fighters for France was raised again, although he did not speak. What actually went on became a matter of confused recollection for some of those involved, but is made clearer by reference to the Minutes.(118) Afterwards the flow of fighters was staunched,

118. The confusion has ensnared several of the eminent, beginning with Beaverbrook, of whom Terraine says, pp.137-38, 'He was never one to let mere facts spoil a good story'. Next to slip was Taylor, *English History*, p.485, followed by Wright, pp.101-07, in which Dowding himself mistook the date on which he presented a graph of fighter losses to the Cabinet. Among others at fault are B.Collier, *The Defence of the United Kingdom* (HMSO, 1957), p.109 and P.Townsend, *Duel of Eagles* (London, 1974), pp.251-53.

In fact, Dowding attended two meetings on 15 May:

1. Chiefs of Staff Committee no.133 at 10 a.m., and
2. War Cabinet no.123 at 11 a.m.. He spoke in far more detail at the first meeting but some of those words have been attributed to the second meeting where Newall, as CAS, put the RAF's case. Nevertheless, the gist of Dowding's sentiments is plain to all. See M.Gilbert, *Winston S.Churchill*, vol.vi, *Finest Hour*, 1939-1941 (London, 1983), pp.340-43, who quotes CAB 79/4, COS (40), 133rd meeting, 15 May 1940, 10 a.m.; CAB 65/7, W.M.123 (40), 123rd meeting, 15 May 1940, 11 a.m. Compare CAB 65/13, W.M.153 (40), Confidential Annex, 3 June 1940.

although not stopped before several changes of policy were made, much to Dowding's chagrin.(119) It is important to explore the reality of what happened at these meetings, because exaggeration of the role played by Dowding has helped to create the myth that he alone saved the nation by struggling to retain his squadrons in Britain. In this, Dowding played his part, but the efforts of others, particularly Newall, should not be disregarded.

Next day he wrote what is generally regarded as his most influential document, a letter comprising ten points, to the Air Ministry. Two of them explain his position clearly. Also, they

119. In Douglas, *Years of Command*, pp.79-80, the author suggests that the question of fighters for France was complicated by a misunderstanding. Churchill, in *Second World War, vol.ii, Their Finest Hour* (London, 1949), p.38, claims that Dowding had declared to him that Britain could be defended against 'the whole might of the German Air Force' with 25 squadrons of fighters. Such a figure resting in the Prime Minister's mind, could explain his readiness in requesting the despatch of six more squadrons to France on 16 May, when he was in Paris. Dowding strongly denied ever having offered that figure. Writing years later to Douglas, he spoke of a 'desperate battle to be allowed 36 squadrons, which, anyway, were far fewer than the 52 squadrons given in the Air Staff estimate of requirement. Is it reasonable to suppose that I then told Mr. Churchill personally that 25 would suffice? The suggestion is ridiculous'; Douglas, *Years of Command*, p.79. In another letter to Douglas, Dowding stated, 'It seems probable that Churchill, who never admits that he was wrong, dreamed up the absurd statement that I had told him that the Country cd. be successfully defended by 25 Squadrons'. Douglas papers, File 2, Dowding to Douglas, 28 March 1964.

The figure 25 is a transposition of the numerals making 52. There could have been an error in the proof-reading of Churchill's script. Yet Dowding never questioned the figure between the publication, firstly, of the Prime Minister's memoirs in 1949 and, secondly, of Douglas's autobiography seventeen years later. Taking all factors into account, the error appears to have been Churchill's. If he genuinely believed that the number required was 25 it is a salutary reminder of how the course of history may be changed by misunderstandings. See also Joubert, p.135, which further complicates the mystery. See also Wright, pp.118-20.

demonstrate the state of mind in which he approached the forthcoming battle over Britain and illustrate his need to be sparing with what forces lay at his disposal for fighting a defensive campaign:

5. I would remind the Air Council that the last estimate which they made as to the force necessary to defend this country was fifty-two squadrons, and my strength has now been reduced to the equivalent of thirty-six squadrons.

10. I believe that if an adequate fighter force is kept in this country, and if the Fleet remains in being, and if the Home Forces are suitably organised to resist invasion, we should be able to carry on the war single-handed for some time, if not indefinitely. But, if the Home Defence Force is drained away in desperate attempts to remedy the situation in France, defeat in France will involve the final, complete and irremediable defeat of this country. (120)

Fighter Command was widely employed in the crucial week covering the main evacuation of the British Expeditionary Force from Dunkirk. The RAF Component had returned to Britain on 21 May and the aerial defence of forces on or near the French coast was then provided by squadrons under the command of No.11 Group, flying from airfields in Kent. (121) At one and the same time Dowding enjoyed the satisfaction of having aircraft back under his control, but carried the burden of protecting an army facing disaster and a navy valiantly attempting to save them.

120. AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, Appendix 11. See also Dowding Papers, HCTD/ S.305, 'Fighters to France', 16 May 1940.

121. Orange, p.26, shows that on 26 May Park explained to his staff the system he intended to use. Details are given in AIR 16/216, Employment of Fighter Aircraft - Policy, October 1939 - December 1941.

Demands on Fighter Command were exacting and by 3 June almost every squadron had been engaged in sorties over the area of battle. Casualties were extremely heavy, with the Command losing 432 Hurricanes and Spitfires in three weeks following the opening of the German offensive; 106 of these were suffered during a week of evacuation from Dunkirk. By 1 June, Dowding had at his disposal 331 Hurricanes and Spitfires ready to fight - and the battle for France was not then over.(122)

On 3 June he again attended a Cabinet meeting. This time he did speak.(123) In a factual and unemotional manner he pointed out the bleak future facing Home Defence if more fighter squadrons were sent abroad in answer to pleas, now that the French Army was in a parlous state. 'Our fighter operations must be regulated', he believed, 'by the rate of output in such a manner as to ensure that we were not squandering the capital of our fighter aircraft'. Dowding produced a graph to demonstrate the 'wastage'

122. See AIR 20/2307, Hurricane and Spitfire aircraft - strength, production and wastage, January-December 1940. Hough and Richards, p.100, use the AHB Narrative, 'The Campaign in France', pp.474-75, to state, 'Among these destroyed or abandoned aircraft 386 were Hurricanes and sixty-seven Spitfires - the very types Dowding so sorely needed for home defence. Fighter Command itself had lost no fewer than 219 Hurricanes, Spitfires, Defiants and Blenheims'. Orange, p.89, adds, 'More than a quarter of Britain's fighter force had been lost over France even before the evacuation began'. He also says that 453 fighters were destroyed or abandoned during the whole French campaign. A.Deere, *Nine Lives* (London, 1974), p.71, gives the figure of 229 aircraft, approximately 50% of front-line strength, lost by Fighter Command over Dunkirk. Bowyer, p.53, notes, 'From May 10th until the end of Dynamo, a total of 432 Hurricanes (mainly) and Spitfires had been 'expended' - the rough equivalent of at least 20 squadrons'. Townsend, *Duel of Eagles*, p.279, offers the figure of 331 Spitfires and Hurricanes and adds, 'Beside the three hundred odd Hurricanes and Spitfires, another one hundred and fifty obsolete fighters were shown on the order of battle, but Dowding had no illusions about them'.

123. See above, Note 118.

of Hurricanes between 8 and 18 May, a period when 250 had been lost, a rate of 25 each day, while only four a day were being received from production. At that rate, 'we should have expended all our Hurricanes by the end of May'. The facts were irrefutable and overcame all contrary arguments.(124)

By the end of the Western campaign the RAF had lost over 900 aircraft in six weeks; of these, the Hurricanes and Spitfires, numbering 453 if the figure given in the Air Historical Branch (AHB) Narrative is accepted, were pearls without price in Dowding's eyes. It is small wonder that he showed relief at the French surrender on 22 June. 'I don't mind telling you', Dowding said to Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, with deep emotion, 'that when I heard of the French collapse I went on my knees and thanked God'.(125)

The proving ground of battle had resolved several questions and, inevitably, some were to the detriment of the Royal Air Force. The Luftwaffe was a formidable adversary, shrewdly used as an integral component of Blitzkrieg and their fighter tactics were more flexible and effective than those of Fighter Command; they

124. What Dowding said on 3 June is shown in CAB 65/13, W.M.150 (40), 153rd Meeting, 3 June 1940, 11.30 a.m.; CAB 65/7 and Confidential Annex, Minute 10: CAB 65/13, folios 235-40. See Gilbert, vi, pp.455-58.

125. Halifax Diary, 8 February 1941, Halifax Papers, A.7.8.19, quoted in *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan*, edited by D.Dilks (London, 1971), p.299. Dowding was not alone in these sentiments. Of Britain's relationship with the Third Republic, Foot has written, 'The British ruling class had mistrusted it ever since the mutinies of 1917 and were delighted to see it go'. M.R.D.Foot, *S.O.E. in France: An Account of the Work of the British Special Operations Executive in France, 1940-1944* (HMSO, 1966), p.140. However, this view must be tempered by Britain's realisation that the collapse of the Third Republic brought German forces to within twenty-two miles of southern England.

had again proved decisively that employing unescorted bombers in daylight raids verged on the suicidal;(126) Bomber Command's attempts at intervention by making night attacks on German industry were barely noticed;(127) the Me.109 was an excellent aircraft, especially in the dive and climb.(128)

On the other hand, British fighter pilots had gained rapid and valuable, though costly, experience in air battles, flying against opponents, some of whom had learned their craft in Spain and Poland. Hurricanes and Spitfires had shown the ability to

126. For example, of 71 unescorted Battles and Blenheims despatched to attack German ground targets on 14 May 1940, 40 were lost. See Terraine, p.134. For a German view of these and similar attacks, see C.Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (London, 1969), pp.150-55.

127. By mid-June, 430 night attacks were made by Bomber Command on German oil targets. 'However, industrial damage was negligible ... not a single German fighter or anti-aircraft gun was withdrawn from the Western Front to protect the Reich'. Richards and Saunders, i, p.124.

128. See A.Galland, *The First and the Last* (London 1955), pp.64-65, who compares favourably the virtues of the Me.109 with those of the Hurricanes and the Spitfire. For a contrary view, see Deere, p.52. See also AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, *The Battle of Britain*, p.100, quoting the experience of Squadron-Leader Malan, No.74 Squadron, who found that the Me.109 had a better performance over 25,000 feet than either the Spitfire or the Hurricane.

shoot down every type of enemy bomber they met; pilots were able to engage the Me.109 with confidence, being able to turn inside the German plane.(129)

Few people appreciated at the time that, in spite of Germany's overall success in the Western campaign, the Luftwaffe had received a particular setback in its first failure of the war and had suffered heavily.(130) On 23 May, Goering had telephoned Hitler with the offer that the Luftwaffe, single-handed, would destroy British resistance at Dunkirk. 'We have done it!' he told Milch, the Inspector-General of the German Air Force, at headquarters. 'The Luftwaffe is to wipe out the British on the beaches. I have managed to talk the Fuhrer round to halting the army'.(131) Such reasons as poor weather and a lack of forward

129. Broadhurst interview, 10 November 1989. For a contemporary view, given by a British pilot, of the manoeuvrability of the Hurricane in combat with Me.109s, see P.Richey, *Fighter Pilot* (London, 1941), pp.105-08. An American airman who had flown both Me.109s and Spitfires, wrote, 'I was able to find that the Spitfire is the best fighter aeroplane in service'. However, he pointed out the weakness of the carburettor which dogged RAF fighters throughout much of the battle. 'In inverted flight the Rolls-Royce engine cuts out. The Messerschmitt, on the contrary, remains perfect in any flying position'. Major A.de Seversky, 'Some Ideas on the War', *Flight*, 20 June 1940. The weakness was overcome by the remarkable Miss Beatrice Shilling, of the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, who designed a simple device, known in the Service as 'Miss Shilling's Orifice'. Royal Aeronautical Society lecture, 'Rolls Royce and the Merlin', A.H.Bailey, Bournemouth, 24 September 1990.

130. See L.F.Ellis, *The War in France and Flanders, 1939-1940* (HMSO, 1953), p.314. The RAF 'took a good toll of German aircraft and pilots and to that extent weakened the blow which the enemy delivered subsequently in the Battle of Britain'.

131. For an account from the Luftwaffe Chief of Intelligence, who overheard the conversation, see Schmid interview, 22 June 1954, quoted in R.Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership in the German Air Force* (New York, 1970), p.160. Schmid said, 'Hitler, stopping no longer to think than Goering had before making his suggestion, agreed to the proposal'.

bases have been advanced to explain the Luftwaffe's subsequent inability to support the confidence of their Commander-in-Chief, but the courage and skill of RAF pilots, flying excellent machines, must not be overlooked among the prime reasons for the German failure.(132)

Dowding's sorest blow was from the number of pilots lost in the French campaign, many of whom were experienced airmen, the cream of the pre-war Fighter Command, with long flying hours to their credit. Had they survived, they would have commanded flights and squadrons in which their skill would have been invaluable. Their loss threw a heavy burden on to the Command, especially for those formations which came to be led by new commanders, lacking the knowledge of their predecessors. The Commander-in-Chief felt the greatest sympathy for all of his pilots and on 2 June wrote a general letter of thanks to the squadrons, showing again his care for his men.(133)

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132. D.Irving, *The Rise and Fall of the Luftwaffe* (London, 1974), pp.90-91, comments on 'the local daylight air superiority achieved over the Me.109 by the British Spitfire fighter operating at short range over Dunkirk. All German calculations had assumed that Professor Messerschmitt's plane would prove the better of the two, but now the Spitfire wrought havoc on the German fighter squadrons'. Some British and many German pilots would have rated the two aircraft as approximately equal adversaries. See, however, Deere, p.52, who agrees with Irving's judgement. See also, for example, Bekker, pp.158-59.

133. As an example of pilot losses in Fighter Command, on 30 May, No.11 Group had only 362 pilots; during the Western Campaign they lost 128. See AIR 16/352, No.11 Group: operations over France, May- June 1940, p.8, Appendix B and Appendix D which shows the pressure exerted on the Group. See also AIR 19/162, Sir Archibald Sinclair: Private Office Papers, 1940. Shortage of pilots. This gives some reactions to the shortage. AIR 41/15 ADGB, ii, p.9, shows Fighter Command's pilot casualties in May and June as 284 killed, prisoner or missing; 63 wounded or injured.

PART FIVE: CONCLUSION - WHY RETAIN DOWDING?

Hence on 10 July, as the Luftwaffe opened its main attacks on the United Kingdom, Dowding's hold on his position as Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command was far less firm than most people appreciated. Bearing in mind the background to his many disagreements with the Air Staff, and the weakened state of his Command after the end of the French Campaign, a question suggests itself. Why was it that, in spite of what appear to be radical and enduring differences between Dowding and his masters, he had lasted so long in office? There are three main reasons for the anomaly.

Firstly, no other senior officer in the RAF had managed to acquire such a deep and detailed knowledge of the basic workings of a fighter defence over the years leading down to the Second World War. In part, this was due to his length of service which included, between 1926 and 1929 the position of Director of Training at the Air Ministry and, more especially from 1930 to 1936, the position of Air Member for Supply and Development (AMSD). With this width and depth of experience behind him, Dowding was able, on taking over Fighter Command in 1936, to play a full part in promoting the rapid changes that took place.

For example, he took a considerable role in the development of metal monoplane fighters - Hurricanes and Spitfires - together with their powerful Rolls-Royce engines, eight-gun armament and radio control. The Commander-in-Chief was a pioneer of

Operational Research (OR). Much of the credit for the promotion of Radio Direction Finding into a defensive system of high merit can be awarded to him, especially for the manner in which his Department supported experiments during 1935-6. Under his guidance, the system of transmitting information to Operations Rooms, from which action could be controlled, was developed. The integration of a carefully planned and co-ordinated system of defence owed much to his understanding of the technology involved. (134)

Secondly, in spite of the wish of the Air Staff to replace Dowding, a series of emergencies and accidents had occurred which made change either undesirable or impracticable. In August 1938 the Air Ministry's letter informing Dowding that his services would not be required after the following June was followed in the next month by the Munich Crisis. Subsequently, the significance of Fighter Command increased in the plans for overall defence of Great Britain and the role of its Commander-in-Chief grew in importance. The rush to expand the Command demanded a continuity of leadership and Dowding was not replaced. From then until the outbreak of war the political situation in

134. For details of Dowding's earlier career, see Wright, especially Chapters 1-3, and Collier, *Leader of the Few*, especially Chapters 1-14. See also Squadron-Leader B.Ogilvie's notes, 'Dowding Memorial Project', 1987. It must be borne in mind that Dowding's position at Fighter Command, strengthened by his width of knowledge of the changes required, was further reinforced by the speed of events. See C.Grey, *A History of the Air Ministry* (London, 1940), p.302, who quotes Dowding's broadcast of 12 August 1939. 'The rapidity with which Air Ministry scientists produce one invention on top of another is almost embarrassing at times'. His presence at Fighter Command ensured continuity during these changes.

Europe was increasingly unstable, especially after the German occupation of the remainder of Czechoslovakia in the Spring of 1939, providing further reason for the maintenance of the *status quo*.

Nevertheless, in August 1938 the Air Ministry had informed Air Vice-Marshal C.L.Courtney, then Air Officer Commanding, Reserve Command, that he was to succeed Dowding on 1 July 1939. The change of command would probably have taken place had not Courtney been involved in an air crash on 28 June 1939. He suffered serious leg injuries which kept him out of action for some time - and left Dowding at his post at Bentley Priory.(135)

The force of events, more than any measured and distinctive planning by the Air Council, ensured that, in spite of a not inconsiderable degree of mutual animosity, Dowding was at the head of Fighter Command when war started. More particularly, he was still in control as the Battle of Britain opened on 10 July 1940.

A third reason for the retention of his command is one often overlooked. Through the nature of his dedication to fighter defence and the undoubted skill he had demonstrated in preparing for it, he had gained the approbation and support of two eminent politicians. Each had come to believe him to be the commander best equipped to lead the forces of Fighter Command against the impending German attack.

135. See Douglas, *Years of Command*, pp.40-42, for a description of the crash in which he was involved. See also Grey, p.302.

The first was Lord Beaverbrook with whom, in spite of their totally differing personalities, Dowding had already formed a satisfactory working relationship. Almost from the moment of taking office as Minister of Aircraft Production, Beaverbrook found himself at odds with the Air Staff on matters related to the building of machines and, more importantly, to the lines of future development for the RAF. Finding that Dowding, also, had reservations about the abilities of the inhabitants of the Air Ministry, Beaverbrook was able to feel and share sympathy with an ally. (136)

Writing of the relationship between Dowding and Beaverbrook, A.J.P. Taylor made an assessment which is partially revealing. 'The association plunged Beaverbrook headlong into controversy with the Air Ministry', he stated, ignoring such factors as Beaverbrook's personal ambition and abrasive style. His support of Dowding was a secondary, not primary cause of controversy, a point made unwittingly by Taylor on the previous page, when he wrote of Beaverbrook, 'He did not run the ministry as a trained administrator or a politician would have done. He ran it as he

136. Beaverbrook's keenness and gratitude at becoming Minister of Aircraft Production on 14 May, then, later, a member of the Cabinet were noted by 'Chips' Channon, a Conservative M.P. His diary entry for 12 June 1940 quoted Beverley Baxter's mordant wit in describing Beaverbrook as acting like 'the town tart who has finally married the Mayor'. *The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon*, edited by R.R. James (London, 1967), p.257. Beaverbrook often referred to the occupants of the Air Ministry as 'the bloody Air Marshals', which Slessor translated as 'a generic term applied by Lord Beaverbrook to the senior officers of His Majesty's Air Force'; Slessor, p.308.

ran his newspapers, as he had run his financial undertakings, and as he ran his private life. He ran it as a drama, working through individuals, not through committees, and ready to fight every rival'.(137)

An example of Dowding's more cordial relationship with Beaverbrook was demonstrated on 5 July, when he was asked by the Minister to provide Spitfires for photographic work. 'Of course I grudge every Spitfire which is taken from the Fighter Command until the supply situation has improved', Dowding replied, then added with a note of charity seldom displayed to the Air Staff, 'but I must take a broad view of the question'.(138) Dowding's respect for Beaverbrook was shown later in a letter to *The Times*. 'Lord Beaverbrook gave us those machines (i.e., fighters)', he pointed out, 'and I do not believe that I exaggerate when I say that no other man in England could have done so'. Their mutual consideration lasted until Beaverbrook's death.(139)

137. A.J.P.Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, 1972), pp.415-17. See also H.Dalton, *The Fateful Years, Memoirs, 1931-45* (London, 1957), p.300. Dalton refers to Beaverbrook's 'immense energy', his 'utter disregard of all rules or orders except his own' and his 'totally unprincipled initiative'. His value to Dowding was that he rapidly built up the strength of Fighter Command, inheriting the legacy of expansion left by Sir Wilfred Freeman. According to Dalton, Beaverbrook's Whitehall nickname was 'the great disorganiser'.

138. AIR 16/659, A.O.C. Fighter Command correspondence, May-November 1940. Dowding to Beaverbrook, 5 July 1940.

139. Lord Dowding, *The Times*, 1 June 1945, p.5. See also Beaverbrook - Dowding correspondence, House of Lords Record Office (HLRO), Historical Collection 184, Beaverbrook Papers, BBK C/120, Dowding, Lord Hugh and family, 1914-1964, passim.

The second politician was Churchill himself, who had for some time harboured certain doubts over the running of the Air Ministry.(140) He approved of Dowding's organisation of Home Defence and respected the manner in which the Commander-in-Chief had fought, with others, to retain squadrons in England at the time of the French catastrophe, even when the Prime Minister himself was under pressure from other agencies to send them. As the spotlight turned more brightly on to Fighter Command after Dunkirk, and as an awareness of the demands arriving on its pilots became more obvious, Churchill warmed towards the efforts made by those young men and, *pari passu*, their Commander-in-Chief.(141)

The importance of such political support was paramount under the British system of governmental control of the Armed Services. In matters of policy, Parliament was the final arbiter; in the application of policy, the Services, in spite of their tremendous individual power were servants of the Crown, through Parliament. To retain his command, an officer of Dowding's rank and

140. According to J.M.Lee, *The Churchill Coalition, 1940-1945* (London, 1980), p.83, Churchill created the Ministry of Aircraft Production in 1940 'for his friend, Beaverbrook, in order to take responsibility from the Air Ministry'. Churchill's interest in the RAF was of long standing with a knowledge probably unequalled by any other politician. He had been appointed Secretary of State for War and Air as early as January 1919. See Dean, pp.33-37. For the period 1922-39, see M.Gilbert, *Winston S.Churchill, vol.v, Prophet of Truth* (London, 1976), p.1163, Index of references to the RAF.

141. See above, Note 3. See also Gilbert, vi, pp.662, 729, 735, 736, 741-42, 765-66, 767-68, 783-86 and 791.

responsibilities, which could affect immediately the lives of ordinary people, found it necessary to enjoy the confidence of his ultimate masters, the politicians. At the commencement of the aerial battle over the United Kingdom, the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command had certainly gained that.(142)

Nonetheless, neither the serving officers in the Air Ministry, nor Dowding, knew at that time the extent to which the Prime Minister's support for him was based on the needs of the moment. Churchill's immediate sight approved the requirement for fighter defence and thus for Dowding to be retained. 'In the fierce light of the present emergency', he wrote to Beaverbrook on 8 July, 'the fighter is the need, and the output of fighters must be the prime consideration till we have broken the enemy's attack'. Then the Prime Minister's distant vision looked to the shape of policies to come. 'But when I look round to see how we can win the war I can see there is only one sure path'. He showed a sage appreciation of the current military position and an estimate of the future. 'We have no Continental Army which can defeat the military power'. The blockade, he thought, was broken and Hitler could find resources in Asia and Africa. Churchill believed that if he were repulsed from Britain, or even did not attempt to invade, 'he will recoil Eastward and we will have nothing to stop him'. But, continued the Prime Minister,

142. In Churchill's opinion, Dowding was the best man for the immediate task of holding the Luftwaffe at bay and thereby denying the Germans the opportunity of early seaborne invasion. For the Prime Minister's growing confidence by early July, see Gilbert, vi, Chapter 32, 'The great invasion scare'. For Dowding's own appreciation of his burden, see AIR 8/863, p.4543, paragraphs 1-6.

'there is one thing that will bring him back and bring him down and this is an absolutely devastating, exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland'.

In this expression of opinion, Churchill had nailed his colours to the mast. He shared the belief of the Bomber Lobby within the Air Ministry in the power of aerial attack against the Germans' economy and their morale. 'We must be able to overwhelm them by this means', he continued, adding significantly, 'without which I do not see a way through'. His final words were, 'We cannot accept any lower aim than air mastery. When can it be obtained?' (143)

As a result, Churchill, while suggesting the immediate importance of Fighter Command, and even recommending in his letter to Sinclair on 10 July that Dowding should be retained 'while the war lasts', (144) recognised that fighters would not bring final victory. His words would have brought solace to the strong current of determination within the Air Ministry to have him replaced, preferably by the end of October at the latest.

143. Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/414, vol.1, Special Correspondence, 1940-45, Churchill to Beaverbrook, 8 July 1940. Churchill's constant search for possibilities of taking the offensive was noticed time and again. The attitude was summarised by his words to a general in 1942. 'Trouble with you generals is that you are defensive minded. Why don't you attack? That's the way to win battles, not by sitting down in defence'; Horrocks, p.119. See also *The Memoirs of Lord Ismay* (London, 1960), p.161. However, for a contrary view on which factor would settle the outcome of the war, see J.M.Spaight, 'The War in the Air: First Phase', *Foreign Affairs*, 18,2 (1940), pp.357-67. It 'will be decided by sea power ... air power cannot prevail against sea power'; (p.365).

144. See above, Note 3.

As the contest with the Luftwaffe developed over subsequent weeks, further reasons to have Dowding removed were discovered, or developed, by his chief critics, who came to appreciate the value of political patronage in support of their case. Gradually, moves were instituted to bring about changes in the leadership, strategy and tactics of Fighter Command.

Consequently, it may be seen that Dowding's differences with the Air Staff were of no sudden appearance, but had developed before the war and especially after Newall, a younger and junior officer, was preferred as Chief of the Air Staff in 1937. The reputation for controversy and argument which Dowding had gained was one based not only on the tenacity with which he fought for his Command, but also on his unyielding opposition to the claims of others on the resources of the Air Ministry. There were occasions when tact and co-operation with fellow officers would have brought greater mutual benefit.

The impression gained that Dowding was a lonely prophet struggling against the incompetence and ignorance of the leaders of the RAF is no fair assessment of what either he or they had achieved before the opening of the Battle of Britain. Their judgement that he had served four years in his Command and should be replaced by a younger, and undoubtedly more co-operative officer, was understandable.

The value of political support for him then has been underestimated. Sinclair, new to the Air Ministry, (145) was unready to resolve the difficulties faced by his predecessors. Beaverbrook and Churchill backed Dowding as the best, or only, Royal Air Force officer who was capable of leading Fighter Command into battle. However, within two months they were to see that the commander who had shown such clarity and ability in strategic preparation had a less sure touch in its tactical application.

* * *

145. Sinclair was one of the first ministers appointed to Churchill's all-Party Coalition on 10 May 1940. He was leader of the Liberal Party. The other two Service ministries were led by Anthony Eden, Conservative, War Office, and A.V. Alexander, Labour, Admiralty. See Gilbert, vi, p.317.

CHAPTER TWOTHE LUFTWAFFE: BRITISH PERCEPTION AND
GERMAN REALITY

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CHAPTER TWO: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE HILL

PART ONE: THE LUFTWAFFE'S ANTICIPATED ROLE

The fear of German aerial attack which had existed in the United Kingdom throughout the later 1930s was overestimated. In view of the predictions of what would happen in the earliest stages of a war, great benefit would have accrued to Sinclair, Dowding and Newall in July 1940 had they enjoyed the luxury of examining the actual motives and power of their enemy. By looking at "the other side of the hill", which in this case meant no more than the short distance across the Dover Strait, they would have discovered an opponent whose intentions and current capabilities were somewhat different from those that they had come to believe. As these misconceptions affected the attitudes towards leadership, strategy and tactics shown by the RAF, it is necessary to examine similar factors in the Luftwaffe.(1)

The perception of people in Britain was that the disaster which had befallen them and their allies on the Continent was part of a clearly defined plan of action laid by the Germans ever since the arrival to power of the Nazis in 1933. They invested Hitler with a reputation for instituting and carrying through calculated schemes aimed first at dominating the whole of Europe, then as

1. F.Hinsley, *British Intelligence in the Second World War*, 4 vols., (HMSO, 1979), i, pp.61, 78-79 and 299-300, shows variations in Intelligence estimates of the size of the German Air Force. See also AIR 40/2321, Summary of Minutes of DD13.

much of the remainder of the world as he could either conquer or influence. The bloodless victories of the Rhineland, the Anschluss and Czechoslovakia, followed by the successful campaigns against Poland, Norway and France were seen as inexorable steps in his timetable. For them, the signing of the Russo-German pact of August 1939 demonstrated the Fuhrer's cynical approach to the morality of international politics - and was a further step in his calculated planning towards German success.(2)

In all of this, the Luftwaffe had played a prominent part and gained an awesome reputation. The overwhelming success enjoyed by the German Air Force, first against Poland, Norway, then in the Low Countries and finally over the French Army was a fearful novelty in war. Stories and rumours of the effect of dive-bombing on ground troops and installations were magnified, with vivid descriptions of the noise of screaming aircraft and siren bombs.(3) For many people in Britain, the proof of Germany's infallible might was offered by the sight of a returning, exhausted British Expeditionary Force (BEF), rescued from

2. See W.Churchill, *History of the Second World War, The Gathering Storm*, 6 vols. (London, 1948-58), i (1948), p.212. On 14 March 1938 Churchill warned the House of Commons that Germany had 'a programme of aggression, nicely calculated and timed, unfolding stage by stage'. While disagreeing with Churchill's assessment and believing that Hitler was more of an opportunist, Taylor, *English History*, p.404, note 1, admits that 'the contemporary estimates of German armaments and of Hitler's supposed plans shaped British policy'.

3. For the effect of dive-bombing on French infantry, see M.Bloch, *Strange Defeat*, translated by G.Hopkins (Oxford, 1949), pp.54-55. Also see Horne, pp.247-49.

Dunkirk, but having suffered a military defeat of ominous magnitude. Little imagination was demanded to transfer what had happened across the Channel to the surroundings of southern England, in a *furor Teutonicus*.

In spite of the RAF's magnificent effort during the French Campaign, especially in the later stages of the evacuation, there was no small amount of trepidation over the power of the Luftwaffe, even before enemy aircraft opened their main attacks on Britain. Such an ordeal was seen as the inevitable next stage in the German plan.(4)

The reality was that the Luftwaffe had not been over-equipped for the type of Continental land war it was called upon to fight from 10 May and that many of its successes in the Low Countries and France were achieved as much through weaknesses of opponents as by its own organisation.(5) Then, when the next frontier was presented, in the form of the English Channel, the German Air Force was faced with goals which lay beyond its capabilities. It was well for British leaders who did not appreciate this point that their ignorance was shared by their opponents.

4. Air Ministry, *The Battle of Britain* (HMSO, 1941), p.9, spoke of the German mind being 'very methodical and immensely painstaking. Schemes are worked out to the last detail; the organisation is superb and, provided the calculations are correct, the plan goes without a hitch'. General Sir Edmund Ironside wrote of the Germans that they 'daren't not do something. They will begin with some three or four days' intensive bombing and then air landings with parachutists, followed by sea landings'. *Ironside Diaries*; diary for 13 July 1940, p.385.

5. See above Chapter 1, part 4, 'The French Connection'.

A radical and crucial difference between Fighter Command and the Luftwaffe was now demonstrated. At this stage, the former was being called on to fulfil the role for which it had long prepared, namely the aerial defence of the United Kingdom. The latter, however, was charged with achieving an objective for which it had neither adequate resources nor ability - the defeat of Britain without help from either the German Army or Navy. (6)

* * *

Before 1938 the Germans had given little thought to the possibility of a war with Great Britain. As Hitler turned his attentions towards countries of Central and Eastern Europe, there was a widespread belief that the British Government, though not always agreeing with his actions, would take no firm steps to intervene. It was expected that the diplomacy exercised by the Fuhrer would always prevent relations deteriorating into conflict. (7)

6. Compared with the RAF, the Luftwaffe was a young force, having existed unofficially since 15 May 1933 and officially since 1 March 1935; the Luftwaffe in 1940 was generally unprepared for war with Britain. In the view of MRAF Lord Tedder, a German air offensive against the United Kingdom 'was not a considered operation'. See H.Schliephake, *The Birth of the Luftwaffe* (London, 1971), p.31 and Lord Tedder, *Air Power in War* (London, 1947), p.94. See also W.Murray, *The Luftwaffe* (London, 1985), p.47, who summarises the position. 'In retrospect, the task facing the Germans was beyond their capabilities'. See also R.J.Overy, *The Air War, 1939-1945* (London, 1980), pp.23-25.

7. According to D.Irving, *Goering* (London, 1989), p.190, in November 1937 Goering told Sir Neville Henderson, the British Ambassador in Berlin, 'It is inconceivable that there should ever be war between men who get on so well together and respect each other so much as the British and German airmen'.

Even the cooling of friendship between the two nations during 1938 failed to quench the fires of hope. When Ernst Udet, head of the Luftwaffe's technical department, was discussing the proposed Heinkel He.177 heavy bomber with Dr Ernst Heinkel, he spoke against its development, suggesting that four-engined aircraft would not be needed. 'It's possible that Jeschonnek (Chief of Operations Staff) and the General Staff may not even have a use for it. None of them think that we'll be going to war with England'. His faith in the nation's leader expanded. 'A war against England is completely out of the question. If anything happens at all, it will be a conflict with Poland or Czechoslovakia. The Fuhrer will never let us in for a conflict which might take us beyond the confines of the Continent'.(8)

In essence, the abandonment of the development of a heavy bomber was an error of the greatest magnitude in German planning. Its potential had been foreseen by General Walther Wever, the first Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, whose width of vision in strategy encompassed the value of a bomber which could reach targets far distant from Germany. However, after Wever's untimely death in a flying accident in 1936, the work was gradually discontinued. Then, after the experiences of the Luftwaffe in the Spanish Civil War had shown the possibilities of tactical co-operation between air and ground forces, great store was set on producing bombers capable of making dive-bombing attacks on targets.

8. Quoted in Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, p.82, from E.Heinkel, *Stormy Life* (Stuttgart, 1953), pp.411-13. Suchenwirth adds, p.83, that Udet, Goering and Jesschonnek 'accepted Hitler's erroneous belief that there would be no war with Britain for the simple reason that Germany did not want it'.

It is not without profit to speculate about what different policies would have been adopted by the Luftwaffe had Wever lived. His influence was great and he would undoubtedly have pressed for a strategic air force equipped with heavy bombers. What is less certain is the extent to which he would have been able to influence Hitler and Goering, when the Luftwaffe proved its value as a tactical force in Spain.(9)

In reality, an important change of attitude between Britain and Germany occurred in February 1938, when reports of the proposed occupation of Austria became known. According to Irving, Goering's reaction to the general outcry in the British Press was to complain to Sir Nevile Henderson, the British Ambassador, on 16 February about constant British interference in what the Germans saw as a domestic matter. 'Two days later, Field-Marshal Goering ordered his Luftwaffe to investigate the feasibility of conducting air operations against London and southern England after all'.(10)

9. See, for example, *Luftwaffe*, edited by H.Faber (London, 1979), Chapter XII, 'Bomber Decisions', especially pp.160-64, where a report from General Deichmann, Chief of Branch 1 (Operations) of the Luftwaffe General Staff, shows the extent to which Goering and Milch overruled the development of a four-engined bomber after Wever's death. See also R.J.Overy, *Goering, 'The Iron Man'* (London, 1984), pp.102-04.

10. Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.205. Henderson himself does not mention this conversation, but refers to a meeting with Hitler on 12 February, when the Fuhrer uttered complaints in the same vein. 'Nothing, he said, could be done until the Press campaign against him in England ceased. (He never failed to harp on this subject in every conversation which I had with him)'. Sir Nevile Henderson, *Failure of a Mission* (London, 1940), p.115.

The instruction was passed to General Felmy, commander of Luftflotte II by General Stumpff, Chief of the Air Staff, charging him to examine possible targets in Britain.(11) However, the first, and smaller, crisis of 1938 passed without a direct confrontation between Britain and Germany and both air forces continued to expand as rapidly as their governments would allow.

With the approach of the next wave of crisis in 1938, namely the confrontation with Czechoslovakia, the thoughts of German leaders were once again channelled towards a possibility that they were unwilling to face. That was that there might be war with Britain. Therefore, on 23 August General Felmy was ordered by Goering to gather further information on possible targets which could be attacked in the United Kingdom. These included armament factories and docks in London, at that time Britain's largest industrial centre and seaport. The Channel ports and airfields in eastern England were also included, the latter showing the planning within the Luftwaffe then that raids on the United Kingdom would be made by unescorted bombers flying across the North Sea from aerodromes in north-western Germany.(12)

11. Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.64. See also Telford Taylor, *The Breaking Wave* (London, 1967), p.105. Taylor's source was an account, prepared in 1955 by Karl Klee, 'Operation "Sea Lion" and the Role Planned for the Luftwaffe', and now kept at Maxwell Airforce Base, Alabama, USA. According to Taylor, the order was passed to Felmy on 18 February; the targets included ports in southern England and factories in and around London.

12. See Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, p.230, referring to D/11/1, Karlsruhe Documents, interview with General Felmy, 22 November 1954. See also T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.105-06.

On 17 September Felmy was appointed to lead Sonderstab (Special Unit) England and five days later produced his report. He offered small comfort to his readers. 'With the means available we cannot expect to achieve anything more than a disruptive effect', he wrote. 'Whether this will lead to an erosion of the British will to fight is something that depends on imponderable and certainly unpredictable factors'. He summarised by claiming that 'a war against England with the means at present available appears fruitless', then added a point not lost on those planning future attacks against the United Kingdom, when he explained that for Luftwaffe aircraft to undertake such raids, airfields would be needed in Belgium and Holland.(13)

The Munich Crisis was a watershed for the Luftwaffe as much as for the Royal Air Force. In mid-October Hitler ordered a five-fold expansion of the German Air Force and plans were laid for an air armament programme lasting until the autumn of 1942. On 15 October, Goering discussed the possibility of an air war against Britain with Erhard Milch, Chief Inspector of the Luftwaffe, while on the 26th a full conference was held at Karinhall, his country estate, to lay plans.(14)

13. Second Air Group Study on 'Planning Case, Green', 22 September 1938, quoted in Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.64. See also Wood and Dempster, pp.224-25. See also Schliephake, pp.48-49. T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.105-06 notes that Goering was angry with Felmy's pessimistic memorandum. Felmy pointed out that bombers would have to fly from Germany and that with a bomb load of only 1,200 lb. their range was no more than 425 miles.

14. See Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.67.



These showed clearly that, at the time, German strategy envisaged attacking Britain in two particular ways. Firstly, the importance of the Royal Navy and sea-trade to the United Kingdom was acknowledged by the allocation of thirteen out of the planned 58 Geschwader of bombers, to be employed against the British Fleet, using mines, torpedoes and bombs. These *Seekampfgeschwader* were enhanced with the buccaneering title of 'Pirate Formations'. Secondly, of the remaining 45 bomber Geschwader, 30 were to be occupied in an offensive against the British mainland and here, He.177s were requested as the best machines; at least 500 were required by 1942. It is remarkable that at this stage no more than fifteen Geschwader of medium bombers were set aside for an aerial campaign against France. Under the title of 'Concentrated Aircraft Procurement Programme', the document was signed by Jeschonnek on 7 November 1938.(15)

The plan was most ambitious and much faith was being entrusted to two untried types of bomber, the He.177 and the Ju.88. In one sense, the succeeding arguments over the respective virtues of these aeroplanes brought relief subsequently to Britain, because of the Luftwaffe's division of responsibilities. On the one hand there was a need for an aircraft which could provide close support for ground forces, with bombing of extreme accuracy. Thus, early in 1938 both Udet and Jeschonnek supported with enthusiasm an order issued by the General Staff which stated that, 'The emphasis in offensive bombardment has clearly shifted from area to pinpoint bombardment. For this reason, the

15. See Schliephake, pp.48-50.

development of a bombsight suitable for use in dive-bombing aircraft is more important than the development of any other aiming device'.(16)

Consequently, the expansion of the Luftwaffe's role as a force working in close co-operation with the Army was developed, but, in the long run, at the expense of a large bomber which could be used as a strategic weapon against distant enemy targets. The early enthusiasm felt for the Ju.88 included the view that its range would encompass both the British Isles and the Western Approaches; therefore the need for a four-engined aircraft capable of carrying a heavy bomb load was set to one side.

The decision to abandon the building of the large bomber was taken early in 1937, yet in the following year, especially after Felmy's report showed that the contemporary Luftwaffe bombers would have difficulty in making effective raids on Great Britain, attempts were made to press ahead with the He.177. However, this work was bedevilled by the faith pinned in dive-bombing by both Udet and Jeschonnek, who were greatly impressed by the performance of the Kondor Legion's Ju.87s in the Spanish Civil War. They now set the requirement that all bombers should have the capacity to be used in diving attacks.

16. R.Suchenwirth, *Historical Turning Points in the German Air Force War Effort* (New York, 1968), p.31, quoting Karlsruhe Documents, 'The Training Carried out in Bomber Units in Bombardment and Bomb Detonation Techniques (exclusive of the Ju.87 Units)' by Generalmajor Krauss. It was hoped that the diving attacks would be far more accurate, and thereby more effective, than those made in horizontal flight.

In the case of the Ju.88, the changes necessary in design to meet this and other modifications led to an increase in the aeroplane's weight from seven to twelve tons and a resulting loss in speed. For the He.177, the decision was even more disastrous. There were troubles in producing a suitable engine for this bomber and the additional demands of a role as a dive-bomber for the 32-ton aircraft seriously delayed its development.(17)

Thus the muddled strategy shown by leaders of the Luftwaffe long before war began, especially in their mistaken expectation that there would be no conflict with the United Kingdom, proved to be a saving grace for the RAF when the Battle of Britain opened. In the opinion of Suchenwirth, who had the opportunity of discussions with many senior Luftwaffe officers soon after 1945, a long-range bomber would have made a crucial difference between July and October 1940. 'British anti-aircraft defences, admirably developed for use against the German medium-bombers, would have been so thoroughly dissipated by long-range bombers that defeat would have been inevitable'. He also believed that 'its significance in naval warfare ... could have been enormous, especially during the early stages of the war'.(18)

17. Ibid, pp.36-38 shows the effects of the pressure to have dive-bombers; from Karlsruhe Documents, 'Aircraft Technical Data, Branch 6, Luftwaffe General Staff'. See also Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, pp.75-77. However, this policy obviously restricted the Luftwaffe's ability to launch a strategic bombing offensive against an enemy such as Britain.

18. Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, p.43. See also R.J.Overy, 'German Air Strength 1933 to 1939: A Note', *Historical Journal (HJ)*, 27, 2 (1984), pp.465-71, for weaknesses of the Luftwaffe as a threat to Britain. 'No realistic military assessment of German air strength before 1939 can support the conclusion that Britain was ever "at the mercy of foreign power"'; (p.471).

Further steps towards waging a campaign against Great Britain had to be taken, albeit less than willingly, by the Luftwaffe during 1939, as events moved irrevocably towards war. Nonetheless, there was still the hope that such a conflict would not occur until 1942, when the plans laid for the expansion of the German Air Force would be more advanced. (19)

Early in the year, 'Beppo' Schmid, leader of the Intelligence Branch of the Operations Staff, reported with some optimism that 'English and French air fleets are still much out of date. British air defence is still weak. In 1940 we may expect a monthly output of 300 English and 200 French front-line aircraft. In the next few years it is not to be anticipated that they can catch up with German capacity'. Here, the folly of British over-estimation of the power of the Luftwaffe, both in numbers and in ability to strike at the United Kingdom with a campaign of strategic bombing, was matched by a German under-estimation of Britain's industrial capacity to produce aircraft. Schmid added, 'England will not be able to get out of a fight with the German Luftwaffe. German aircraft are superior in view of their advantage in armament, armoured petrol tanks and flying instruments. In Germany alone has an overall view of war in the air been taken'. Schmid's assumptions and predictions were

19. See Overy, *Goering*, pp.84-86, which shows how German preparations for war were unfinished by 1939. 'The conclusion is inescapable that the Nazi leadership sought to expand war preparations and production on a vast scale for a major conflict with some or all of the great powers in the mid-1940s'; (p.86).

several times wide of the mark both before and during the Battle of Britain and were a contribution of no small importance to the failure of the Luftwaffe's daylight campaign in 1940 - and a great boon to Fighter Command. (20)

During the Spring of 1939, senior officers of the German Air Force were told of the forthcoming attack on Poland (*Fall Weiss*). Thus preparations were laid in detail for a campaign well suited to the Luftwaffe's abilities at that time, working closely with the Army in a 'Blitzkrieg' onslaught designed to gain a rapid victory. (21)

Nonetheless, the spectre of a possible war with Britain lurked not far behind the shoulders of Luftwaffe leaders. Between 10 and 13 May, General Felmy carried out a three-day exercise at Luftflotte II's headquarters in Brunswick, based on war with Great Britain in 1939. Milch flew there on the last day to hear a summary of the results. This was less than sanguine. In the subsequent report, 'Tactical Aims for the Luftwaffe in the event of war with Britain in 1939', it was asserted that 'the equipment, state of training and strength of the 2nd. Air Force

20. Luftwaffe 8th Abteilung report on the strength of foreign air powers, May 1939, quoted in W. Baumbach, *Broken Swastika* (London, 1960), pp.30-33. See also Wood and Dempster, pp.101-02. For further weaknesses of Schmid's estimates, see below, notes 93-104.

21. According to Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, p.240, preparations for the Polish campaign began in April 1939, after Anglo-French guarantees were given to Poland. On 3 April, General Keitel issued Directives to the Army, Navy and Air Force. However, Kesselring carefully avoids admitting an early foreknowledge of Hitler's intentions, although as Commander-in-Chief of Luftflotte I he must have known them. See *Kesselring Memoirs*, pp.41-42.

cannot bring about a quick decision in any war with Britain in 1939', a view of disquieting importance in the long run for Nazi leaders who were preparing to march.(22)

Such pessimism was not shared by Hitler, especially after an event which buoyed his hopes with misguided confidence. On 3 July he attended a special display of the Luftwaffe's latest weaponry at Rechlin, arranged to impress him. The Fuhrer was shown aircraft, weapons and equipment at the research stage, including the He.176, the world's first rocket-propelled aeroplane. Nowhere did he see aircraft at the operational level and he gained an exaggerated view of the Luftwaffe's capabilities. Goering, who was present, and in a position to offer Hitler a balanced assessment of what he was witnessing, failed signally to do so. Three years later, he complained, 'The Fuhrer reached the most serious decisions as a result of that display. It was a miracle that things worked out as well as they did, and that the consequences were not far worse'. Goering conveniently overlooked his own responsibility for the results of that day.(23)

22. Karlsruhe Documents, 'High Command of the Air Force, Chief of the General Staff, 1st (Operations) Branch, No.5095 of 1939, Top Secret Command Matter, 22 May 1939, G/V/2a, quoted in Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, pp.230 and 325. See also T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.106-07.

23. Eng.Gen. Gerbert Hubner, 'The engineer problem in the Luftwaffe, 1933-1945', p.21, quoted in Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.74. See also Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, pp.232-33, who believes that if Hitler had been better informed of the Luftwaffe's inability to attack Britain effectively he would have been less ready to invade Poland.

Until the last moment, German leaders hoped that Britain and France, in spite of their protestations, would refrain from war over the Polish question, believing that the operation was no more than a reclamation of what belonged to Germany. In addition, the geographical position of Poland in eastern Europe appeared, in their eyes, to make a Franco-British intervention unlikely, bearing in mind Britain's traditional reluctance to become involved in the affairs of Eastern Europe. (24)

While at that stage Hitler appreciated the value of a strategic bombing campaign against Britain if it were to be necessary, he was determined to exercise personal control of what was done. 'Any favourable opportunity of an effective attack on concentrated units of the English Navy, particularly on battleships or aircraft-carriers, will be exploited', he ordered in 'Directive No.1 for the Conduct of the War', dated 31 August. 'The decision regarding attack on London is reserved to me.'

24. Britain's difficulty in rendering rapid help to the Poles was underlined by Lloyd George, speaking in Parliament after Chamberlain's guarantee to Poland. 'If war occurred tomorrow, you could not send a single battalion to Poland', he said. 'I cannot understand why before committing ourselves to this tremendous enterprise, we did not secure beforehand the adhesion of Russia'. He called the move 'a frightful gamble'. Such expressions of doubt from so eminent a statesman were not lost on the Germans. See 345 H.C. Deb. 5s, c.2505-11, 3 April 1939. See also J. Douglas-Hamilton, 'Ribbentrop and War', *JCH*, 5, 4 (1970), pp.45-63, which refers to conversations held between a London banker and Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, on 26 and 27 July 1939. According to Ribbentrop, Hitler wanted to come to a firm understanding with Britain, whom he did not believe would enter a war on behalf of Poland.

Attacks on the English homeland are to be prepared; though it should be borne in mind that inconclusive results, due to the use of insufficient forces, are to be avoided in all circumstances'.(25)

When hostilities against Poland began on 1 September, the Luftwaffe gained rapid and overwhelming success over an air force smaller in numbers and equipped with relatively outdated machines.(26) After this, Hitler turned his attentions to the West and very soon identified the opponent posing, in his view, the greater danger to Germany. In 'Directive No.6 for the Conduct of the War', issued on 9 October 1939, he spoke of an early offensive, moving through Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. The purpose of the offensive was to defeat the French and any other armies standing in the path, 'and at the same time to win as much territory as possible in Holland, Belgium and northern France to serve as a base for the successful prosecution of the air and sea war against England and as a wide protective area for the economically vital Ruhr'. In this, his policy was not only to obtain bases from which Britain could be subjected to a strategical bombing campaign, but also to provide a protective belt of defences against RAF bombing of German industry.(27)

25. 'Directive No.1 for the Conduct of the War, 31 August 1939', quoted in *Hitler's War Directives*, edited by H.Trevor-Roper (London, 1964), pp.3-5.

26. For the equipment of the Polish Air Force, see Gunston, pp.68-70.

27. 'Directive No.6 for the Conduct of the War, 9 October 1939', from Trevor-Roper, pp.12-14. For an assessment of the Luftwaffe's capabilities and limitations at the start of the war, see Schliephake, p.58. A summary of the German Air Force's role during the Polish campaign is given in Murray, pp.31-33. See also AHB Translation, vol.2, No.VII/132, 'German bombing of Warsaw and Rotterdam'; T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.108-09; Air Ministry, *The Rise and Fall of the German Air Force*, Pamphlet No.248 (London, 1948), pp.53-57.

On 22 November plans were produced by the Intelligence Operations Staff of the Luftwaffe and signed by Schmid, giving a panoramic description of Britain's importance and position in the war, allied to suggestions of the most effective methods of attack against her. (28) He began by claiming that as Britain had been forced into the war earlier than she had anticipated, 'It may be counted as a political victory for Germany that such an unfavourable moment for the opening of hostilities was in fact chosen'. His second point showed a keen awareness of what had happened in 1918. The British aim in war, he stated, 'is to bring Germany to her knees by severing our entire foreign trade, both imports and exports'; and he continued by noting that British policy envisaged a long conflict.

Schmid then assessed the two enemy states. 'From Germany's point of view', he claimed, perhaps not unnaturally agreeing with the Fuhrer's directive, 'Britain is the most dangerous of all possible enemies'. The war could not be won until she had been overcome. France received less praise, being relegated to 'the second class, for, unlike Britain, she would not be capable of carrying on the War without her Allies'. Therefore, Germany's war aim had to be 'to strike at Britain with all available weapons, particularly those of the Navy and the Air Force'.

28. AHB Translation, vol.2, No.VII/30, General Schmid, 'Proposal for the Conduct of Air Warfare against Britain', German Air Force Operations Staff (Intelligence), 22 November 1939.

The strategy of attack was clear and one to which U-boats paid great attention for the remainder of the war, after the Battle of Britain. 'Britain may most effectively be weakened by attacks on her overseas trade routes'. The German aim had to be to reduce the import trade and this could be achieved only 'by the most ruthless use of all available possibilities'.(29) He added that although attacks would be made on ships in harbour, they would not be made on civilians. 'Should the British Government wish to protect the civilian populations of certain harbour towns, ample time for evacuation will be available before the coming into force of this order'.

Schmid's statement of strategic intent was clear and would have proved a far greater burden to the RAF had formations of four-engined heavy bombers been available. A relative disadvantage of Britain's geographical position was underlined when he pointed out that the United Kingdom had between nine thousand and ten thousand kilometres of coastline to defend, compared with Germany's nine hundred to one thousand kilometres. The retention of the right to reprisal was upheld, if the RAF were to bomb towns in West Germany, and the report explained that Luftwaffe attacks would be more effective, 'due to the greater density of population and the big industrial centres'.

29. This was a long-term view of strategy, shared by Admiral Doenitz of the German Navy, who had little faith in 'Operation Sealion'. He believed that Britain could be forced to surrender by 'war on her sea lanes of communication, which concerned her directly and vitally. On them directly depended the very life of the British nation'. See *Memoirs: Ten Years and Twenty Days*, by Admiral Doenitz, translated by R.H.Stevens (London, 1959), p.115.

In view of what happened later in the Battle of Britain, one piece of advice was of particular interest. 'It would be an error to carry out any other air attacks', Schmid wrote, 'such as attacks on enemy airfields, for example, as this would be diverting our effort from the main target, - the paralysis of British overseas trade'.(30)

The report, written in an optimistic vein, would have been the basis for an excellent strategic plan, had the Luftwaffe possessed adequate and suitable resources. However, the largest aircraft generally available both at this stage and also later in attacks on Britain in 1940 was the Heinkel He.111K, which was no more than a medium bomber.(31)

On the same day, a further document from Luftwaffe Intelligence, entitled 'Plans for Air Warfare on England', expanded on some of the points made.(32) It explained that, as Hitler's proposed

30. An example of where Schmid's thinking was detached from the reality of the subsequent Battle of Britain is shown in Galland, *First and Last*, p.70, which points out that Luftwaffe attacks were 'of sheer necessity directed against the concentration of the British defence'. The length of Britain's coastline then became irrelevant.

31. The bomb load of the Heinkel He.111 B-2, used first in the Spanish Civil War, was 3,307 lb. Variants used during the Battle of Britain could carry 4,407 lb. of bombs. These weights compared unfavourably with those of Allied aircraft later in the strategic bombing campaign against Germany. For example, the Lancaster Mk.I carried 14,000 lb., the Halifax Mk.II 13,000 lb., and the B-17D Flying Fortress 10,500 lb. See Wood and Dempster, pp.439-40 and Cooper, pp.72, 96, 98, 101 and 116-17. In addition, German bombers had a weak defensive armament. See Seward, pp.103-04 for the effects of this on the later planning of 'Bomber' Harris.

32. AHB Translation, vol. 2, No.VII/26, Luftwaffe 8th Abteilung report, 'The Course of the Air War against England', 22 November 1939.

Autumn attack in the West had been postponed, the German Air Force (GAF) had been presented with opportunities of attacking Britain. The plan required continuous attacks, by day and night, in widely separated areas. Thus, the Royal Air Force would need to keep units in the United Kingdom and 'even perhaps withdraw fighter units already sent to France', an assessment with which Dowding would have agreed.

Nevertheless, the weakness of a proposed German bombing onslaught on Britain, a campaign which its protagonists hoped would force her out of the war, was shown by the plan's last sentence. 'The attacks will be carried out by FLIEGERKORPS X with 2/K.G.30, K.G.26, K.G.100 and K.G.4 (based on Wever)'.(33) In the following Appendix 1, in which groups of targets were listed, the magnitude of the task facing a few formations of German medium bombers was made clear. They included warships, both in port and at sea; the naval dockyards of the Tyne, the Clyde, Birkenhead and Barrow-in-Furness; harbour installations at Liverpool ('second largest milling centre'), the Manchester Ship Canal; Bristol Channel-Avonmouth ('large fuel installations'); Cardiff ('Main port of reshipment for English coal - export to France -'); Swansea ('timber stocks'); the 'important military target' of Billingham ('90% of the British H.E. industry').

The thought that Britain's main industrial and trading capacity could be overwhelmed by the bombers then available to the Luftwaffe shows an over-weening confidence, or ignorance, on the part of Luftwaffe Intelligence, which made no mention of the

33. A Kampfgeschwader consisted of 94 aircraft at that stage. See A.Price, *Luftwaffe Handbook, 1939-1945* (London, 1977), p.16.

possible effect of Fighter Command's interventions in defence of targets. Had Sir Hugh Dowding been able to see the report, his confidence in what his squadrons would have to face from daylight attacks would have remained undimmed. More ominous for the Dowding System of defence, though, would have been the German plan to launch night raids on the targets listed. At that stage, the Royal Air Force was most poorly equipped to deal with enemy aircraft flying in darkness which were 'lost' once they had crossed the coastline of the United Kingdom.(34)

* * *

During the early months of 1940, the planned Luftwaffe offensive against Britain's ports and seaways never materialised. The 'Phoney War' on land in Western Europe was matched by what appeared to be no more than a patchwork of aerial attacks on parts of the United Kingdom. These, in the main, were directed against targets on the eastern coastline and varied from a few daylight raids on units of the Royal Navy at Rosyth and Scapa Flow, to the sowing of magnetic mines at night in well-used coastal waters.(35)

34. See AIR 41/17, ADGB, iii, 'Night Air Defence, June 1940-December 1941', Chapter 1.

35. In the opinion of T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p.107, 'The Luftwaffe did not attack during these months because its leaders saw no prospect of decisive results'. This underlines the inability of the Luftwaffe to wage an effective campaign against Britain. The degree to which the predicted 'knock-out blow' fell short of expectation is shown in Ministry of Information, *Front Line, 1940-41* (HMSO, 1942), p.6. No bomb fell on mainland Britain until 9 May 1940. 'The first bombs on the London area hit plough-land at Addington in Surrey on 18th June'.

Part of the constraint laid on the activities of the German Air force stemmed from the lack of a suitably destructive bomber. As much, however, was the fact that to carry out the large-scale campaign, well trained and practised crews were required, fully conversant with the intricacies of night bombing and these were in short supply. A most important further cause was the requirement to use the Luftwaffe elsewhere. It was widely employed in the Norwegian Campaign, then had to be prepared for the main offensive in the West in early May.(36)

Therefore, before the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe had played an immense role in the gaining of German success and had been widely employed in close conjunction, mainly with the Army and, to a lesser extent, the Navy. However, it had enjoyed little opportunity of engagements against Britain, which had been identified as the chief enemy, yet whose people had been spared the apocalyptic bombing predicted by many leaders prior to 1939.

Some writers have made the point that the Luftwaffe held a great advantage over the RAF, certainly at the start of the Battle of Britain, through the practical experience gained by German pilots

36. The German invasion of Norway began on 9 April. The importance of the Luftwaffe's role there may be gauged from T.K.Derry, *The Campaign in Norway* (HMSO, 1952), passim. At the start, the Luftwaffe operated some 1,200 aircraft in southern Norway alone. See Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.87. However, Murray, p.39 believes that the strategic results of the German victory were, in the long run, counter-productive. See also J.Scutts, *Luftwaffe Bomber Units, 1939-41* (London, 1978), pp.12-14 and J.Scutts, *Luftwaffe Fighter Units, Europe, 1939-41* (London, 1977), pp.10-11.

in previous campaigns, especially the Spanish Civil War. On reflection, however, the results of this experience must be judged at two levels. It can then be argued that although service in action before July 1940 brought benefits to aircrew, particularly in the fighter arm, that same experience caused the strategic planning of the Luftwaffe to be concentrated later on a type of campaign which could not be used profitably against Britain. Therefore, a balanced assessment must weigh the results and estimate the importance of their effects during the period, July to November, 1940. (37)

First, tactics for fighter and bombers were evolved during the Spanish Civil War and employed with great effect both then and later. Also, German airmen were able to evaluate different types of Luftwaffe aircraft used by the Kondor Legion, discovering their various strengths and weaknesses in action. In Schliephakes's opinion, 'The Luftwaffe gained combat experience in Spain which could never have been gained by theoretical instruction, however well devised, nor by tactical exercises, however well planned'. The contrast with the training of RAF pilots in the same period is very marked. (38)

37. For example, see Deighton, pp.43-45; H.Allen, *Who Won the Battle of Britain?* (London, 1974), pp.71-73; E.Sims, *Fighter Tactics and Strategy* (London, 1972), pp.87-88 and 92; Galland, *First and Last*, pp.68-69.

38. Schliephake, p.44. Between 1918 and 1939 there was no occasion when RAF pilots flew in action against enemy aircraft, thereby practising tactics under conditions of war. The experience of many was limited to the RAF's role as a 'police-force' in parts of the British Empire, particularly Iraq, Transjordan and Aden. See Dr Philip Towle's lecture, 'The RAF and Air Control between the Wars', given at The Royal Aeronautical Society, London, 5 March 1990, and printed in the Royal Air Force Historical Society, *Proceedings*, No.8, September 1990, pp.7-24.

A major cause of the development of German fighter tactics, which soon became the most effective used by any of the world's air forces came, ironically, through the shortage of aircraft available to the Kondor Legion. When the first few Me.109s were sent to Spain in Spring, 1937, Oberleutnant Gunther Lutzow, commanding the 2nd Staffel of Jagdgruppe 88, and his successor, Oberleutnant Joachim Schlichling, had to devise an economic method of employing them. Previously, fighters had been flown in vics, or echelons of three aircraft. However, according to Spick, they were now flown in pairs. 'Through experiment it gradually became apparent that the best way to use a pair was to fly them in-line abreast about 200 yards apart'.(39)

This brought three benefits, which were realised immediately by German airmen. First, each pilot had a clear field of vision inwards, watching the blind spots behind and below his companion. Secondly, any attacker of one of the pair would be followed by the second aircraft and thus become a potential victim. Thirdly, the leader of the pair was always reassured, in making an attack, that his own tail was covered by his wingman.

When larger numbers of Messerschmitts were employed, they were flown in fours, either line-astern or line-abreast, the incomparable 'Finger Four' formation. The problem of changing course with a Staffel of twelve aircraft was overcome by the then Leutnant Werner Molders, who suggested the crossover turn, which maintained the formation's efficiency in action.(40)

39. M.Spick, *Fighter Pilot Tactics* (Cambridge, 1983), p.43.

40. Ibid, pp.38 and 43-44. Some disadvantages of the 'finger-four' for wingmen are shown in M.G.Burns, *Bader: The Man and His Men* (London, 1990), pp.152-59.

With customary thoroughness, the Luftwaffe ensured that many promising pilots were posted to Spain to gain experience. As soon as this had been achieved, they were sent back to Germany as instructors at training establishments.(41) However, long-term disadvantages to the Luftwaffe's operations as a strategic air force also resulted from the Spanish campaign.

Wolfram von Richthofen, cousin of the famous fighter ace, served there as a colonel. Through force of circumstances he was compelled to use Luftwaffe fighters and bombers in the role of artillery for attacking ground positions. With this experience, he became an advocate of developing co-operation with the army by a tactical employment of aircraft in land battles. On his return to Germany he was placed in charge of a headquarters staff section 'for special duties', which were, according to Schliephake, to evaluate 'guide-lines for the organization, training and operation of ground attack formations on the basis of the experience gained in Spain'.(42)

In this way, the Luftwaffe pressed ahead with developing its role as a tactical air force, well suited to the role of co-operation with ground forces and became a crucial component of German blitzkrieg tactics aimed at smashing an enemy. Ideas of air-ground warfare, developed in theory before September, 1939, and then in practice with devastating effect over the following ten months, brought great satisfaction to the German airmen involved and gave them a feeling of invincibility over the battlefield.

41. Pamphlet No.248, p.14. For personal recollections of a German fighter pilot in the Kondor Legion, see Galland, *First and Last*, Chapter VI, 'Ground-strafting the Rojos'.

42. Schliephake, p.44. See also Pamphlet No.248, pp.14-17.

What the Germans failed to appreciate, however, was that the effects of experience in the Spanish Civil War brought the Luftwaffe little benefit when confronted by an enemy who was protected by a sea-barrier never less than twenty-two miles in width. As an example, the role of dive-bombers as a form of artillery running just ahead of advancing troops was of no avail if the Army could not be landed to follow up the destruction of strong-points. Also, in general throughout that war the Luftwaffe had enjoyed considerable air superiority, so that bombing attacks had been carried out with precision, often uninterrupted by the intervention of fighters. Therefore, German planning, for example, of what could be achieved by unescorted bombers, such as the He.111, was unrelated to the reality of what would be experienced in British skies, defended by fighters.(43)

Consequently the claim often advanced that the Luftwaffe obtained great benefit from the Spanish Civil War needs to be qualified. The fighter arm of the German Air Force profited more than the bombers; and Luftwaffe strategists drew some false conclusions which worked to Britain's advantage during the Battle of Britain.(44)

* * *

43. Among the mistaken conclusions drawn by Luftwaffe strategists was one shared with some planners of the RAF, namely the superiority of bombers over fighters at that time. 'It was believed then and for some time afterwards that in daylight attacks, bombers would be able to master enemy fighters and thus would not need to be escorted'. AHB Translation, vol.9, No.VII/121, A.Galland, 'The Battle of Britain', February 1953, p.6.

44. See Galland, *First and Last*, pp.37-38, who claimed that the strategists 'refused to lower themselves to the knowledge of air warfare gained in the Legion, considering it to be purely tactical'. See also Overy, *Air War*, p.14.

PART TWO: THE WESTERN CAMPAIGN AND ITS EFFECTS

Another factor to be taken into account when assessing the actual power of the Luftwaffe at the start of the Battle of Britain was that victories won in Poland, Norway, the Low Countries and France had been bought at heavy cost. While accepting that Germany had the world's most powerful air force both in numbers and experience in September 1939, the losses suffered in these early campaigns were far from light. Much has been made of the demolition of opposing air forces before July 1940 and, rightly, of the heavy casualties taken by the Royal Air Force, especially Fighter Command, during the Battle for France.(45) What is often overlooked is that the Luftwaffe, also, was affected in the same manner, though not to the same extent, through the loss of machines and experienced crews.

A study of the records of the German Air Ministry's Quartermaster-General's Department proves that losses in May were heavy. They show that in the month, 1,044 Luftwaffe aircraft were destroyed on operations, 229 of them fighters. Single-engined fighters, that is, Me.109s, totalled 147, while twin-engined Me.110s numbered 82; twelve other fighters were lost, not

45. See above, Chapter 1, Note 122.

on operations. During June, wastage was smaller, yet significant, comprising, from all causes, 100 Me.109s and 26 Me.110s. The total figures for bombers lost from all causes during the same two months was 643.(46)

What brings these figures into sharper focus was the comparative paucity of German aircraft production from the start of the war, a factor of great importance. There were fewer replacements than needed and opportunities for expansion were limited. This point is reinforced by studying the respective figures of fighter production by both sides for the whole of 1940. Luftwaffe records show a total of 3,382 single-engined and twin-engined aircraft; the British figure was 4,283, all single-engined. Overall, Britain trebled production during the year while in Germany it was doubled. Considering the importance of single-engined fighters as the battle progressed, and the shortcomings of Me.110s in action against Spitfires and Hurricanes, the weaknesses of the German position were underlined by the fact that the figure for production of Me.109s was only 2,268.

46. AHB Translation, vol.4, No.VII/83, 'German Air Losses (in the West only), September 1939 - December 1940', records of VI Abteilung Quartermaster-General's Department of the German Air Ministry. Galland, *First and Last*, p.52, has a more optimistic memory, claiming that 'losses in men and material had been small'. Pamphlet No.248, p.76, however, explains that many Luftwaffe units had to rest and refit with dive-bombers, 'having suffered heavy losses'. Murray, p.42, quotes 'Einsatz des II Fliegerkorps' (Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, USA), K113, 306-3, v.3, to show how Fliegerkorps II lost more aircraft in one day over Dunkirk than during the previous ten. From pp.42-45 he shows that Me.109 pilot casualties for May and June were 169, over 15% of the total available. When, in 1945, Kesselring was questioned about losses in the campaign, he said that low-level attacks had been costly. 'Flak was strong in that campaign'. U.S.Strategic Bombing Survey, APO 413, Interview No.61, 28 June 1945.

The difference in building, repair and replacement was accentuated later in the year, but was an important influence even before the first main attacks were launched against the United Kingdom.(47)

Much of the blame for the Luftwaffe's failure to produce sufficient aircraft has been laid at the door of Udet. He, however, in common with many other German leaders, had the feeling that the successes gained during the Western Campaign would bring a rapid end to the war and that plans for new building and expansion would not be needed. One general remembered Udet's triumph at the end of the French Campaign when he heard him claim, regarding the programme for building aircraft, that the 'war is over. Our plans are not worth a damn ... We don't need them any longer'.(48)

This failure to maintain production, combined with a lack of appreciation of the different mode of a strategic warfare needed against Britain, led to weaknesses in the Luftwaffe after the defeat of France. This was a carelessness, stemming from over-confidence, destined to prove expensive to the German Air Force.

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47. See Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, pp.66-67. See also Terraine, pp.188-94, who shows, p.191, production figures. See also Beaverbrook's three reports on the Ministry of Aircraft Production, made to the War Cabinet. First Report, W.P.(40) 211, 19 June 1940; Second Report, W.P.(40) 427, 27 October 1940, especially p.2; Third Report, W.P. (40) 489, 24 December 1940. All in Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/362, papers presented to the Cabinet by Lord Beaverbrook as Minister of Aircraft Production, 19 May 1940 - 6 June 1941.

48. Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, p.86.

At the end of the French Campaign, only Britain stood between Germany and total victory in the West. Hitler, enjoying the euphoria of a triumph not only over France, but also over the pessimistic predictions of some of his own generals, (49) was prepared to wait for Britain, believing that sooner or later she would have to accept the reality of her position and sue for peace. Lord Bullock suggests that, in the Fuhrer's reckoning, there was no reason for the British Government to adhere to former policy, as their allies had been subjugated and their Army beaten. 'They must now surely accept the impossibility of preventing a German hegemony in Europe, and, like sensible people, come to terms' (50)

Yet in some ways it was already too late for the Germans, because the three weeks between the evacuation from Dunkirk and the surrender of France gave Britain the opportunity of taking stock and cementing a resolve to continue the war. Winston Churchill, in a series of memorable speeches and wireless broadcasts made during May and June had already reflected the mood of most British people. (51) His approach, 'rhetorical and cheeky at the

49. For some of Hitler's differences with his generals at the start of the war, see Telford Taylor, *The March of Conquest* (New York, 1958), pp.41-64.

50. A. Bullock, *Hitler, a Study in Tyranny* (London, 1962), pp.588-89. The great optimism felt by many Germans was typified by Lieutenant Baron Tassilo von Bogenhardt who wrote, after the French surrender, 'We really did feel that the war was over now. It looked as if we should not even have to land in England'. The British 'hadn't a dog's chance' and would have 'to throw up the sponge'. All that was needed was for 'the Luftwaffe to help them make up their minds'. L. Hagen, *Follow My Leader* (London, 1951), p.123.

51. Gilbert, vi, p.1283, lists Churchill's House of Commons speeches in those months as 13 May (pp.332-33), 28 May (pp.416-17), 4 June (pp.463-68), 17 June (p.566), 18 June (pp.569-71), 20 June (pp.577-80) and 25 June (pp.599-600). Broadcasts were made on 19 May (pp.363-65) and 17 June (p.566).

same time, Macaulay and contemporary slang mixed together', succeeded in cementing a general public determination to combat Hitler and bring a halt to his run of victories.(52)

'What General Weygand called the Battle of France is over. I expect the Battle of Britain is about to begin', he told the Commons on 18 June.(53) Two days later, in Secret Session, he showed traces of a droll humour, combined with a prophetic view of the near future of the war in the air, as his nine pages of typed notes disclose:

Goering. How do we class him ?

He was an airman turned politician
I like him better as an airman.

Not very much anyway

We have had a couple of nights of bombing

Folly underrate gravity attack impending

Learn to get used to it.

Eels get used to skinning

Steady continuous bombing,

probably rising to great intensity occasionally,
must be regular condition of our life.

Looking further ahead, Churchill offered an uncannily shrewd analysis of the course the war would run. Dowding, with his belief in the need for a secure Home Base, would have agreed entirely with this vision, believing Fighter Command to be the main agent of its implementation.

52. Taylor, *English History*, p.473. Taylor makes Churchill's achievement shine more brightly by showing how he lacked support from some of his own Party, who mistrusted him and did not share his voracious appetite for the struggle. See also, for example, *Channon Diaries*, p.258, diary entry for 20 June 1940. For the King's reservations towards Churchill, see S.Bradford, *George VI* (London, 1989), pp.312-13. A detailed account of Churchill's relationship with Halifax, considered by many as his chief rival, is given in A.Roberts, *'The Holy Fox', A Biography of Lord Halifax*, (London, 1991), pp.186-271.

53. Churchill, *ii*, pp.197-99.

If Hitler fails to invade
 or destroy Britain
 he has lost the war.
 I do not consider only the severities
 of the winter in Europe
 I look to superiority in Air power
 in the future
 Transatlantic reinforcements
 If get through next three months
 get through next three years.
 It may well be our fine Armies
 have not said goodbye to the Continent
 of Europe.

The importance of this speech has often been overlooked. It helps to explain what some pessimistic observers regarded as an insupportable policy. Churchill, while acknowledging the forthcoming burden of bombing, foresaw the relief from attack that would be brought later in the year. Then, bearing in mind the faith he shared with the Air Staff in a strategic campaign to be launched against Germany by heavy bombers, the Prime Minister also stressed his hopes for American help, in the reference to 'Transatlantic reinforcements'. The speech was therefore not a show of bravado from a Prime Minister whistling in the dark while facing imminent national disaster. It was, rather, a very shrewd assessment made by a leader whose appreciation of Britain's defensive capabilities by sea and air brought him confidence in the future. Nor should it be forgotten

that the shadow of land war had not fallen on the British homeland, so the nation was unlikely to submit, in boxing terms, 'on the stool'.(54)

Yet his words might not have been spoken, nor their faith been offered to a nation in dire straits, had a recommendation made on the day after the end of the Dunkirk Evacuation been put into practice. On 5 June, Milch, the Inspector of the Luftwaffe, reported to Goering after flying over the beaches. Asked to suggest steps to for bringing the war in the West to a rapid conclusion, Milch made a typically forthright reply. 'I would recommend that this very day all our air units - of both the Second and Third Air Force - should be moved up to the Channel

54. *Secret Session Speeches*, compiled by C.Eade (London, 1946), pp.9-10. N.Frankland, *The Bombing Offensive Against Germany* (London, 1965), p.48, aptly summarises the *raison d'être* of British policy by pointing out that if the Germans were to win, victory would have to be achieved quickly. If they did not, 'time, together with the pressure of blockade and bombing, would test the durability of a corrupt and totalitarian regime'. For a further example of British optimism, see W.N.Medlicott, *The Economic Blockade, vol.i, 1939-41* (HMSO, 1952), p.411, who refers to 'the opportunity of total economic war opened up by the new reality of total danger'. See also *Doenitz Memoirs*, pp.113-14, where Doenitz referred to Britain's decision to fight on. 'It was in keeping with the British character. The British never give up the struggle half way through; they fight on to the end'.

coast and that Britain should be invaded immediately'. Then he added in a voice of prophecy, 'If we leave the British in peace for four weeks it will be too late'.(55)

In retrospect, this time of comparative inaction, which was to contribute in no small measure to Fighter Command's success in holding off the Luftwaffe, requires explanation. Three reasons must be stressed.

To a disinterested observer it would have appeared that German hesitation at this point was a choice for a nation which was in a position to exercise any option it pleased. However, that argument overlooks the result of one important option open to Britain - namely, a refusal to seek terms - a policy which many outsiders found difficult to comprehend at the time. Certainly

55. See Irving, *Rise and Fall*, pp.91-92. Milch's view was shared by Kesselring. Under interrogation he claimed that 'the most opportune time would have been immediately following Dunkirk, but the preparations were not ready at that time. I personally regretted very much that the attack was called off'; *Bombing Survey*, Interview, 28 June 1945. These feelings were shared by many troops. General von Lossberg wrote of German soldiers at Calais, viewing the white cliffs of Dover. 'In the exultation of past success these German soldiers and their leaders came to believe themselves capable of things that no one even dared to think of before the Western Offensive'. Quoted in W. Ansel, *Hitler Confronts England* (New York, 1964), p.115, from General B. von Lossberg, *Im Wehrmachtsfuhrungsstab* (Hamburg, 1950), p.89. A British pilot supported Milch's contention. A German invasion 'on the heels of the evacuating British' would have prevented the expansion of Fighter Command which helped to redress the imbalance of numbers between the two air forces from July to October and thereby had an important effect on the outcome of battle. See Deere, p.71. However, AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.24, asserts that a German invasion at that stage 'would have run counter to all that the Germans believed about the concentrated use of air power'.

the decision was a positive, not a negative, diplomatic choice which placed the onus of response on to Hitler, and thus earned time for the hard-pressed British forces to reorganise and take stock of defences. (56)

In the case of Fighter Command, the period of grace thereby gained was invaluable. The Commander-in-Chief was able to repair squadrons, some of which had been shattered by the French Campaign, the Dowding System was brought to a state of readiness and airfield defences were prepared. (57)

Secondly, the Germans were victims of their own success. At the outbreak of war few had dreamed that inside nine months the Luftwaffe would sit on airfields within short-range fighter distance of England. The suddenness and completeness of victory was overshadowed by a lack of detailed planning for taking advantage of such success. (58)

56. The effects on Hitler of British stubbornness are shown, for example, in B.H.Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (London, 1970), pp.141-43 and G.A.Craig, *Germany, 1866-1945* (Oxford, 1978), p.721. See Churchill, ii, pp.225-31, who refers to them and quotes from the papers and diaries of Count Ciano, Mussolini's son-in-law, who was closely involved with German leaders at that time.

57. For examples of the value of this period for rebuilding squadrons see the reminiscences of two pilots, Townsend, *Duel of Eagles*, pp.277-81 and Deere, Chapter VI. Also see, for example, AIR 20/3457, May 1940 - May 1941, R.A.F. organisation for air action against invasion of Great Britain.

58. See *Kesselring Memoirs*, p.65, who claimed that 'the omission to make the necessary preparations was and remains a grave mistake'.

Thirdly, not the least of the causes of Britain's subsequent salvation was Hitler's relaxation of his own efforts in the West. In his mind rested the constant hope that the British would seek terms, enabling him to turn all attention to his cardinal ambition - the overthrow of Bolshevik Russia.(59)

Therefore, when on 21 May Admiral Raeder placed before Hitler a Naval Operations Staff study of the possibilities of invading Britain, the Fuhrer showed little interest. As late as 17 June, an Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW) report to the Navy stated that he had not expressed an intention to invade.(60)

Hitler's change of direction in the employment of the Luftwaffe can be deduced from his Directive No.13, dated 24 May. No longer was he envisaging the use of bombing solely as a strategic weapon to be employed against Britain's trade routes and ports. The German Air Force was now 'authorised to attack the English homeland in the fullest manner'. Its tactical employment was to start with 'an annihilating reprisal for English attacks on the Ruhr'.(61)

59. See Pamphlet No.248, p.161, which suggests that the knowledge of the forthcoming attack on Russia was given 'to the Army and Luftwaffe staffs soon after the fall of France in June 1940'.

60. E.P.von der Porten, *The German Navy in World War Two* (London, 1972), p.95.

61. 'Directive No.13 for the Conduct of the War, 24 May 1940', in Trevor-Roper, p.29.

The Fuhrer's lack of drive and purpose towards the overthrow of Britain, in spite of what he had written in Directive No.9 the previous November - 'the defeat of England is essential to final victory' - was demonstrated at the end of June and in the first week of July, when he spent time nostalgically touring the French battlefields, then visiting Paris before retiring to the Black Forest. It was not until the beginning of July that the realisation of Britain's determination to fight on really began to concentrate his mind and he issued orders for preparations to be made. (62)

These orders hardly suggested an urgency of purpose. The Fuhrer Directive of 2 July asked for details 'on the basis that the invasion is still only a plan and has not yet been decided on'. Two days earlier, General Jodl's report stated that the ultimate German victory over Britain was only a matter of time. 'First of all must come the fight against the British air force... In conjunction with propaganda and terror-raids from time to time - announced as 'reprisals' - a cumulative depletion of Britain's food stocks will paralyse the will of the people to resist, and then break altogether, forcing the capitulation of their government'. His report was clear on the essential precondition for invasion. 'A landing in England can be taken into view only if the command of the air has been gained by the German Air Force'. (63)

62. Bullock, p.591.

63. See T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.44-46, citing General Jodl, 'The Continuation of War against England', 30 June 1940. Nuremberg document, 1776-ps.

The turning point in proving Britain's resolve to fight on was the bombardment of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir (Oran), ordered by the Cabinet on 1 July and carried into effect two days later. The grave decision to attack the forces of so recent an ally was reached only after the deepest deliberation, but, in Hinsley's opinion, 'was taken in the conviction that the acquisition of them by Germany or Italy would determine the whole course of the war'. The effect was widely felt, not least in the U.S.A., and those who had harboured reservations over British intentions were left in no doubt that there would be no surrender before battle. (64)

In spite of their apparent invincibility, Germany's armed forces were confronted with greater problems than they had anticipated once Britain's unwillingness to capitulate became obvious. The Army could do nothing unless put ashore; the Navy, after crippling losses in the Norwegian campaign, could neither carry

64. For Intelligence reports leading to the action at Oran, see Hinsley, i, pp.149-54. For decisions taken by Churchill and the Cabinet, and their consequences, see Gilbert, vi, Chapter 31, 'Oran: no weakening of resolve'. Von der Porten, pp.117-19, considers that Hitler missed an opportunity of winning over the French at that stage by 'dramatic German political moves'.

nor protect them.(65) Hence, pressure was exerted on the Luftwaffe, the only Service capable of making swift and easy contact with the enemy. Basically, the German war machine was attempting to work on one cylinder out of three.(66)

On 30 June, Goering issued a directive to the Luftwaffe, an order which was a strange mixture of hope and ambition. At the end, the intention of the campaign was clearly set out. 'As long as the enemy air force is not defeated the prime requirement for the air war is to attack the enemy air force on every possible opportunity by day or by night, in the air or on the ground,

65. German naval losses in the Norwegian campaign were:
sunk: one heavy cruiser, two light cruisers, ten destroyers,
four submarines.

damaged: two battlecruisers, one heavy cruiser, various smaller ships.

Proportionally, the Kriegsmarine suffered more heavily than the Royal Navy; see von der Porten, p.92. See also D.Grinnell-Milne, *The Silent Victory* (London, 1976), Chapters 4 and 5. Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 show clearly the weaknesses not only of German naval forces, but also of German merchant tonnage. The estimate was that the first wave divisions required a shipping tonnage of 2.1 million; actually available was .75 million. Another view is offered by R.Wheatley, *Operation Sea Lion*, (Oxford, 1958), p.112, 'The trend of the evidence certainly suggests that, while Sea Lion could not have been launched at the full strength planned, a transport fleet of sufficient numbers had been assembled for the purpose. All the essential naval preparations were thus completed for a landing on the 24th'. For Churchill's view of the power of the Royal Navy, see Gilbert, vi, p.674.

66. This view was supported in a lecture, 'German Air Force Operations against Great Britain. Tactics and Lessons learnt, 1940-1941', given by Hauptmann Otto Bechtle, Operations Officer of KG 2, at Berlin-Gatow, 2 February 1944. See Section 1, paragraphs 2 and 3, from Air Ministry News Service Document. A.M.D. No.25187, Department of Documents, Imperial War Museum. Even before the war, warnings had been given of the Luftwaffe's limitations. See Fritz Sternberg, *Germany and a Lightning War* (London, 1938), p.294. 'Today the air arm plays a much bigger role than it did in the World War, though a word of warning must be uttered against the exaggerated idea that it will prove decisive on its own. Enemy territory cannot be occupied by aeroplanes'.

without consideration of other tasks'. However, the earlier section of the document showed less optimism and called for a tentative approach, less in keeping with the Luftwaffe style of aggressive Blitzkrieg. It spoke of 'the well developed defence forces of the enemy' and ordered that air attacks were to be restricted to 'industry and air force targets which have weak defensive forces'. Every effort was to be made 'to avoid unnecessary loss of life amongst the civilian population'. There would be dislocation of supplies by 'attacking ports and harbour installations, ships bringing supplies into the country and warships escorting them'.(67)

There was no mention of the Luftwaffe's effort being a preamble to, or major constituent of, a seaborne invasion of the United Kingdom. Although the Germans definitely intended such an operation and detailed preparations were made, rifts between the Army and the Navy were already appearing. The basic weaknesses of attempting to move thousands of troops in small ships across treacherous waters without naval superiority caused both generals and admirals to be highly critical of each other's plans. Both hoped that their problem would be solved by a British surrender,

67. Goering's Directive, from Ob.d.L. Fust 1a. No.5835/40 g.K. (Op.1) chefs, 30 June 1940, quoted in Karl Klee, 'The Battle of Britain', in *Decisive Battles of World War II*, edited by H.Jacobsen and J.Rohwer (London, 1965), pp.79-80.

but in the meantime the German Air Force alone would have to bear the burden. Thus Goering, whose light seldom saw the cover of a bushel, was not displeased that his Luftwaffe was being drawn to the centre of the stage.(68)

There are mixed views on the difficulties of preparation for this task. Werner Kreipe, who served in KG 2 until June 1940, then went on to become Chief Operations Officer of Luftflotte III, later wrote, 'the Air Force was ordered to make good its relatively light casualties in crews and machines and to prepare for the next battles which must be fought over the Channel and in the English skies. Within a few days the German Air Force was ready'.(69) Such optimism disregards two factors. One was that

68. Differences between the German Army and Navy were considerable, especially over the proposed extent of the landing area. For flexibility of attack the Army wanted a wide front; faced with a shortage of vessels, the Navy preferred a narrow sector. Both plans presumed a close involvement of the Luftwaffe. See B.H.Liddell Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (London, 1948), pp.148-52. General Siewart, who served with von Runstedt at the time, told Liddell Hart, 'The Navy's heart was not in it, and it was not strong enough to protect the flanks'. The Navy's view was later summarised by Admiral Ruge, who commented that 'The Wehrmacht would never have crossed the Channel; the German soldier is sick if he crosses the Rhine'; Probert and Cox, p.84.

69. W.Kreipe, 'The Battle of Britain', in *The Fatal Decisions*, edited by W.Richardson and S.Freidin (London, 1956), p.10. However, Kreipe contradicts himself on the next page, when he refers to a period of almost three weeks during which ground staff and construction units were 'exceptionally active' in making captured airfields serviceable and in building new ones. This could not have been achieved 'within a few days'. The period of remission was crucial to Fighter Command. See also AIR 41/17, ADGB, iii, p.24, on airfields built in France and Belgium. 'Up to the autumn of 1940, these runways, with concrete surfaces, measured 1500 yards in length and 40 yards in width'.

Luftwaffe casualties in the French Campaign had been greater than he admits, (70) while the second was his failure to mention the inadequacies of the force at his command to fight the type of air war now required.

In addition, time was needed to prepare aerodromes in France and the Low Countries to house the hundreds of aircraft that would use them. According to Kesselring, the task took several weeks. 'The Area Commands with the Labour Service battalions attached to them had every airfield ready for occupation by the beginning of August and ammunition and fuel ready for the great offensive'. He added that the 'squadrons themselves only just had time to settle in on their airfields before the first operational sortie'. (71)

Cajus Bekker, who had wide access to German documents and later interviewed a number of Luftwaffe staff, pointed out that, after 'the wear and tear of the "blitz" campaign against the West', units needed rest and considerable re-organisation before the prospect of assaulting Britain could be considered. He was also convinced that the Luftwaffe was never thoroughly equipped for the unexpected conflict against the United Kingdom. Nevertheless, he underlined the sense of frustration natural among some front-line aircrew: 'We sat about with little to do, and failed to understand why we could not get cracking'. (72)

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70. See above, Note 46.

71. *Kesselring Memoirs*, p.63.

72. Bekker, p.173.

By early July the Luftwaffe had a considerable numerical advantage in aircraft over the RAF and much has been made of this point, often as a background to showing how a small force of British fighters overcame a much larger enemy. What is often ignored, however, is that Fighter Command was, at that time, stronger comparatively than generally recognised and that the strategic placing of Luftwaffe units left that force in a relatively weak position.(73)

Goering and his staff decided that the main attack on Britain was to be made by Luftflotte II, stationed in eastern France and the Low Countries, and Luftflotte III, flying from western France. An additional, though smaller, force, Luftflotte V, was to take up the attack from Norway. Luftflotten I and IV were kept back to defend the German homeland.(74)

73. In the opinion of Dr. Horst Boog, historian of the Luftwaffe, 'It was fighter strength which decided the Battle of Britain'; Probert and Cox, p.32. As the crux of the forthcoming battle was a struggle between two sets of single-seater fighters, it is enlightening to compare the respective figures. Hough and Richards, p.113, support this view; 'The air fighting was thus likely to turn on how well the 700 Hurricanes and Spitfires performed against the nearly 1,100 Me 109s and 110s - a different way of computing the odds and one less daunting for the British side'. German QMG's figures for 13 July give the total of single-engined fighters as 1,077, with 899 serviceable. In the view of Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, p.64, allowing for aircrew available, there were probably 760 Me.109s and 240 Me.110s. Against them on 10 July were 58 fighter squadrons, comprising Hurricanes, Spitfires, Blenheims and Defiants; (See AIR 16/116). If the latter two types on the British side and the Me.110s of the Luftwaffe are subtracted, the balance becomes some 760 German matched against some 710 British aircraft. Wood and Dempster, Appendix 6, give these figures for RAF 'Initially Equipped Operationally Fit Squadrons': 29 June, 814; 6 July, 871; 13 July, 901. However, according to Terraine, p.725, Group-Captain Tom Gleave, of the Battle of Britain Fighter Association, believes that there were only some 500 fighters ready for operations with the RAF. See also A.Robinson, *R.A.F. Fighter Squadrons in the Battle of Britain* (London, 1987), p.15.

74. See T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.120-24, 'Deployment and Order of Battle'.

Accounts of the number of aircraft available to Luftflotten II, III and V at that time vary, but the generally accepted figure appears to be about 2,800.(75) Of these, some 200 were in Norway and, although the point was not appreciated by either side at the time, they had little chance of playing an active part in the forthcoming battle. However, they served the Germans well in one respect, causing the ever cautious Dowding to retain squadrons in the north against attacks which, in the event, came on one day only during the battle.(76)

At the disposal of the German Air Force was a bomber strike-force estimates of whose strength varies. The figure shown in the Luftwaffe Quartermaster-General's returns for 13 July 1940 was 1,347 bombers on strength, with 943 serviceable. These figures referred in the main to He.111s, Do.17s and Ju.88s; figures for dive-bombers, the Ju.87s, on the same day were 436 and 340 respectively. This was to be the prime, indeed, apart from submarine and motor torpedo boat (MTB) activity, the only power of an offensive designed to force Britain into an act of surrender, or to prepare the way for a successful seaborne invasion. The majority of these aircraft were dispersed to the areas covered by Luftflotten II and III, yet it was a

75. See Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, pp.64-65, where he uses German QMG's figures. Also see Boog's figures, given in Probert and Cox, p.24.

76. Nevertheless, Luftflotte V's geographical placement precluded their wide involvement in attacks. Had they been moved earlier to support the effort from French bases, or had they, from July, made diversionary raids on the areas covered by Nos.12 and 13 Groups, they could have contributed more to the campaign.

significant weakness of strategic planning by the German air staff that insufficient forces were placed from the start as close as possible to the narrowest part of the Channel crossing, where the *Schwerpunkt* of an aerial attack would have to take place. This lack of concentration of resources in the main battle area was to cost the Luftwaffe dearly in the long run. (77)

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A major contributory factor to weaknesses in the Luftwaffe in July 1940 stemmed from leadership. For this, blame must be placed first at the top.

It is not sufficient to state that Hitler took little interest in the aerial campaign against Britain, although there is small evidence to prove his close involvement. What is more important is that the Fuhrer had little understanding of a strategic plan by which Britain could be forced to sue for peace by the employment of air power. He never demonstrated wide awareness

77. AHB Translation, vol.7, No.VII/107, 'Luftwaffe Quartermaster General's Returns'. In Terraine's view, the Luftwaffe's success in the French campaign stemmed directly from the application of fighter strength above the battlefield, in a case of 'saturation of a battle area by air power'. In reality, the Germans were never able to achieve that state above southern Britain. See Terraine in Probert and Cox, p.16.

of the value of either air fleets or navies; subsequently the waters of the Channel proved too great an obstacle for his land-based, military thinking.(78) The crossing of an unpredictable and boisterous sea was too much for his vision, which therefore travelled elsewhere across the map-table and the impetus of attack on Britain was lost.

In spite of the traditional German fear of war on two fronts, his greatest ambition was to attack Russia and, in a sense, the defeat of Britain was a sideshow which, ideally but not necessarily, required completion before the *Drang nach Osten* could begin. At this stage his mind was divided between the two objectives, and settling with Britain never held the monopoly of attention required for the success of such a venture. The position became even more uncertain as Hitler vacillated, with

78. H.Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (London, 1979), pp.136-38, fails to blame Hitler sufficiently for the lack of German preparations for sea and air war against Britain. He claims, with a strange logic, that these weaknesses proved 'Germany had neither intended nor made any preparations for a war against the Western Powers'. However, *Kesselring Memoirs*, pp.65-66, are more critical of Hitler, noting that 'the utter neglect of the invasion idea, obvious to every soldier is incomprehensible'. For Hitler's lack of understanding of air power, see R.J.Overy, 'Hitler and Air Strategy', *JCH*, 15, 3 (1980), pp.405-22.

a blend of hope and conviction, until late July that the British Government would come to the conference table. He also appreciated the difficulties of launching and sustaining a successful invasion. (79)

Through the nature of his position in the Nazi state, the Fuhrer could be dictatorial in decision making in a way that, for example, Churchill never was in Britain. The Prime Minister was far more open to the advice of his Chiefs of Staff and to various committees which studied, then reported back in depth on problems to be faced. In Germany, however, Hitler held a type of power against which few men were brave enough to offer an honest opinion and preferment was often shown to sycophants. Without

79. For recollections by some of his generals of Hitler's mood at that time, see Liddell Hart, *Generals Talk*, pp.145-47. See especially *Ciano's Diary, 1939-1943*, edited by M.Muggeridge (London, 1947), pp.277-78: entries for 19 and 20 July 1940. Supporting views are given in R.Gehlen, *The Gehlen Memoirs* (London, 1972), p.38. Gehlen then served as a junior staff officer. See also *The Goebbels Diaries, 1939-1941*, edited and translated by F.Taylor (London, 1982), p.123: his main aim was to attack Russia. 'Everything I undertake is aimed at Russia', he claimed. If necessary, he would 'be forced to come to an understanding with the Russians', before defeating the Western powers, then turning against the arch-enemy. 'I need the Ukraine so that they cannot starve us out, as they did in the last war'. A.Hillgruber, 'England's place in Hitler's plans for world dominion', *JCH*, 9, 1 (1974), pp.5-22.

the generation of interest that stemmed from Hitler's own involvement in any venture, schemes had little hope of sustained progress. (80)

Undoubtedly the Fuhrer hoped that the air war against Britain would be carried on successfully under the leadership of Goering, whose claim on behalf of the Luftwaffe had been constant and, until the setback at Dunkirk, well-substantiated. Never was faith more misplaced. The basic weaknesses of Goering's character as a leader soon became apparent to those who did not already know them.

In this respect, it is instructive to compare the Reichsmarschall's approach to his duties with those, for example, of Sinclair, Newall and Dowding. These leaders of the RAF were hardly charismatic characters, nor noted for frequent appearances among, or widespread popularity with, subordinates. Yet at a political or Service level they were constantly close to the action, seldom far from London and always available as the battle unfolded.

80. The width of Hitler's power within the German State is shown in the League of Nations, *Armaments Year Book* (Geneva, 1938), p.387. 'The Fuhrer and Chancellor of the Reich is the supreme head of the National Defence Forces. He commands directly and personally all the land, sea and air forces. The High Command of National Defence, which serves as military general staff is placed directly under his orders'. F.L.Carsten, 'The German Generals and Hitler', *History Today*, 8, 8 (1958), pp.556-64, points out (p.564), that although a number of generals were opposed to Hitler, they lacked political sense. Others 'were not the opponents of Hitler, but his tools'. Some recollect Keitel's nickname, 'Lakeitel' (lackey). For a comparison with Churchill's relationship with Service advisers, see *Ismay Memoirs*, Chapter XIII, in which he notes, pp.164-65, 'Not once during the whole war did he overrule his military advisers on a purely military question'. This comment is relevant to Dowding's removal from Fighter Command in November 1940.

Unlike the Reichsmarschall, they were innocent of neglecting duties while in pursuit of luxurious living, hunting deer on their own vast estates hundreds of miles from front-line aerodromes or acquiring art treasures from the conquered territories. Whatever the weaknesses of their leadership, they were, at a professional level, striving their best for the Service. In the British State they were more readily answerable for decisions taken and, through their example, encouraged from their immediate subordinates a loyalty stemming from respect. Few showed this quality to Goering.

The extra burdens thrown on to Luftwaffe commanders, even before the battle opened, by the Reichsmarschall's absence from the main fighting area were crucial. During the Western Campaign his war train, *Asia*, was moved forward to western Germany in mid-May, then briefly to France. After a recall to Berlin he returned to France on 5 June and stayed till the 29th. By that stage the air battle over Britain had not commenced and the Commander-in-Chief might have been expected to be present in an organising and inspiring role. Instead, apart from brief interventions, he did not reappear in the front line until 7 September, when, with the tide of battle not running for the Luftwaffe, he arrived in France to take personal charge. (81)

81. For Goering's activities and movements from June to September 1940, see Asher Lee, *Goering: Air Leader* (London, 1972); L. Moseley, *The Reich Marshal* (London, 1974); Irving, *Goering: Overy, Goering*. All *passim*.

Thus the weaknesses of the Luftwaffe chain of command stemmed from the Commander-in-Chief himself. Murray mentions Goering's "mental framework" not exceeding that of an ordinary fighter pilot, which he once had been and goes on to refer to his ignorance of 'logistics, strategy, aircraft capabilities, technology and engineering - in other words, just about everything to do with airpower'.(82) The veneer of bonhomie, charm and camaraderie produced socially acceptable graces unmatched by other Nazi leaders and made 'The Iron Man' a most popular figure at all levels. Yet it concealed flaws of character which were, in the long run, to cost the Luftwaffe heavily. The results of this lack of ability and control from a man who often referred to the air force as if it were his personal possession, were felt by senior officers. Milch, Udet and Jeschonnek carried out their duties without the necessary close support of their Commander-in-Chief.

According to some authorities, several of these leaders were not entirely suited to their responsibilities. For example, it is suggested that Udet, a brilliant pilot, lacked the ability and temperament to serve as chief technical officer, a task involving much desk-work.(83) Possibly, Jeschonnek, an administrator of great potential, was too young and inexperienced to carry the burdens as Chief of the Operational Staff.(84) It is known

82. Murray, p.6.

83. See Galland, *First and Last*, p.127 and Bekker, p.292.

84. See Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, pp.215-19, which points out the difficulties faced by Jesschonnek in dealing with Kesselring, Sperrle and Richthofen, who were his seniors in age, rank and length of service.

that Milch, the Reich's State Secretary for Aviation, was disliked by some Air Force officers who contrasted the slimness of his Service background with his overbearing style and width of ambition. (85)

Kesselring and Sperrle, commanding the two Luftflotten closest to action, were not drawn into a carefully planned and coordinated campaign. The former, in his memoirs, reflected bitterly on the aimlessness of his position just before the Battle of Britain opened. 'In contrast to our previous campaigns', he wrote, 'there was not one conference within the Luftwaffe at which details were discussed with group commanders and other services, let alone with the High Command or Hitler himself'. Kesselring continued by claiming that he had no more than informal talks with Goering, rather than 'binding discussions'. He had been given no instructions for tactical assignments nor co-operation with either the army or the navy. (86)

* * *

85. Ibid, pp.31-32, which shows that a number of Luftwaffe leaders disliked his 'insolent manner'.

86. Kesselring Memoirs, p.67.

On 12 July an Operational Order, signed by Keitel and Jodl, offered some objectives for the Luftwaffe. These were prefaced by a strategic aim. 'England is in command of the seas. Therefore a landing will only be possible on the Southern Channel coast where we can substitute our lack of sea supremacy by air supremacy'. (87) The Order was proof positive of the German faith in air power as a substitute for the shortage of ships and was obviously written by a High Command which was sadly lacking in an appreciation of the intricacies of strategic air power. For the Luftwaffe to obtain supremacy over the Channel coast, a campaign would have to be waged deep inland, encompassing RAF fighter and bomber airfields far from the coast. The German army leaders, grateful for the Luftwaffe's contribution to land victories on the Continental mainland, appeared to overlook the new circumstances of defeating an enemy protected not only by the sea but also by the strongest air force yet encountered.

By 16 July the three Services had reported to Hitler on the possibilities of invasion (88) and on that day the Fuhrer Directive No.16 was issued. To set the lateness of decision by the leadership in context, it should be remembered that the main air battle over the Channel and the south coast of England had been in progress for six days. Yet the opening of the Directive was still couched in tentative terms. 'Since England, in spite

87. AHB Translation, vol.2, No.VIII/40, 'The Effects of Air Power', Document No.WC/87, 12 July 1940.

88. See T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.208-18 and von der Porten, pp.96-97.

of her helpless military situation shows no sign of being ready to come to an understanding', Hitler started, 'I have decided to prepare a landing operation against England', followed by the hesitant addition, 'and, if necessary, to carry it out'. He then laid down that the RAF should be 'so reduced morally and physically' that it could not interfere with the Channel crossing. The Luftwaffe also was to operate against ground targets, such as coastal fortresses, reserves approaching the front, and ships of the Royal Navy.

Even at that stage of the year, the Directive is still asking for plans, details, submissions and proposals 'as soon as possible'. Considering that there were only eight or nine weeks remaining before weather changes would make invasion very difficult, the immensity of the task facing the Luftwaffe is thrown into sharper focus. (89)

The following day, Luftwaffe units were placed on maximum readiness, while, on 19 July, Hitler played his final diplomatic card in a comparatively conciliatory speech made in Berlin. His invitation to the British Government to come to an agreement was clear. (90) When the offer was rejected by Lord Halifax, the

89. 'Directive for the Conduct of the War, No.16, 16 July 1940', from Trevor-Roper, pp.33-37.

90. Hitler's speech, made at the Kroll Opera House, Berlin, included the words 'I consider myself in a position to make this appeal since I am not the vanquished begging favours, but the victor speaking in the name of reason. I can see no reason why this war must go on'. For an assessment of the speech, see T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.59-62, who suggests that the speech lacked 'diplomatic strategy'. For an eyewitness account, see W.Shirer, *Berlin Diary* (New York, 1941), pp.452-57.

Foreign Secretary, three days later, the Germans at last - and too late - realised that action would have to follow.(91)

It was not until this stage that Goering finally called a conference of his commanders to make detailed plans in unison. Needless to say it was held at Karinhall, hundreds of miles away from the action. The destruction of the RAF, especially Fighter command, was high on the agenda, together with attacks on the aircraft industry. Goering asked Kesselring and Sperrle to let him know how aerial supremacy could be achieved - hardly an inspiring opening to a battle which had already started.(92)

* * *

When a number of features of German leadership, therefore, are taken into account, clues are offered for the reasons why the Luftwaffe entered the Battle of Britain at some disadvantage. This fact alone throws doubt on any view that it was in a position of overwhelming superiority in July 1940.

91. Halifax broadcast, BBC Home Service, 22 July 1940. Halifax stated, 'His only appeal was to the base instinct of fear and his only arguments were threats'. Gilbert, vi, p.672, refers to Colville Diaries for 24 July 1940, quoting Churchill's comment that he would not 'reply to Herr Hitler's speech, not being on speaking terms with him'. For reactions in Berlin, see Ciano Diary, pp.277-78. See also Churchill, ii, pp.229-30.

92. Goering conference, 21 July 1940 BA/MA RL2 11/30 'Besprechung Reichsmarschall am 21 July 1940', quoted in Irving, *Rise and Fall*, pp.96-97 and T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.127-28.

A most important cause of uncertainties in leadership at that time may be found in the faults of German Intelligence, a factor not to be overlooked. In some ways this may have been the most crucial factor, because no leader, however dictatorial, will set aims beyond possible achievement. It is therefore essential for advisers to offer truthful and independent opinions.

However, unlike its British counterpart, the Intelligence Branch of the Luftwaffe lacked independence and was held in comparatively low esteem. Thus the Intelligence officer might be called on to deal with extra duties, such as propaganda and censorship.(93) Another vital difference from the practice of the RAF was that in 1940 no Intelligence representative was stationed at any unit below a Fliegerkorps.(94)

There was a sharp rivalry between the various Intelligence agencies, which led to a lack of sharing of material gleaned. This was demonstrated particularly by the 5th Abteilung, the Air Intelligence Department of the Luftwaffe General Staff, under Schmid and the 3rd Abteilung, the Luftwaffe Signals and Cypher Intelligence Service, led by General W.Martini. Probably the main cause was that these Intelligence agencies were victims of

93. The following section on Luftwaffe Intelligence owes much to an unpublished paper produced by Mr Sebastian Cox, of the Air Historical Branch, for the Carlisle Conference on Strategy and Intelligence, 1989. The paper is 'A Comparative Analysis of R.A.F. and Luftwaffe Intelligence in the Battle of Britain'. Here, see H.Boog, 'German Air Intelligence in World War II', *Aerospace Historian*, June 1986, p.122.

94. See Wood and Dempster, p.120.

the German political system, where knowledge brought power, which had to be retained and withheld from rivals. The width of the struggle can be gauged when it is remembered that Intelligence on air matters was gathered by eight organisations and radar information by ten agencies.(95)

Fearful of the traditional fate awarded to bearers of bad tidings, those working in Intelligence tended to tell their superiors what they wanted to hear, rather than confront them with unpleasant realities. For example, Schmid had a reputation for failing to give unvarnished reports, both before and during the battle.(96) General Felmy, who did, was removed from his post.(97) Had the German leaders been confronted with a greater realisation of the true power and potential of the RAF in the summer of 1940, or perhaps if they had listened more openly to criticisms made, there would have been a different approach to their strategy of trying to knock Britain out of the war.

95. Cox, 'Intelligence', pp.3-4.

96. See *ibid*, p.4. Schmid 'gained a reputation within the Luftwaffe for garnishing his reports to make them more palatable to Goering'. See also Wood and Dempster, p.101, and Boog, *Aerospace Historian*, p.122.

97. H.Boog, 'German Air Intelligence in the Second World War', in *Intelligence and Military Operations*, edited by M.Handel (London, 1989), p.193. T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p.106, claims that after Felmy's pessimistic report of September 1938 (see above, Note 13), 'his loss of favour with Goering was permanent'. Felmy was dismissed in January 1940 after an aircraft from his Luftflotte II, carrying secret plans, force-landed in Belgium. See Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.84.

The German Intelligence branches served the Luftwaffe badly in three vital areas, which were to prove critical in the main battle. In retrospect it appears incredible that they were unable to offer the High Command sound advice on them. The first was the lack of appreciation of the width of British use of RDF in defence; the second was an apparent ignorance of Fighter Command's system of controlling squadrons; the third was an inaccurate assessment of the performance and production of British aircraft.

The weakness was clearly shown on 16 July, when the 5th Abteilung produced a summary of the RAF.(98) At no point was Radio Direction Finding mentioned by Schmid, although Martini's 3rd Abteilung was aware of its existence and had attempted even before the war to uncover the frequencies used.(99) The cause of this oversight could have been either ignorance or rivalry, but the result was expensive for the Luftwaffe.

Dowding's carefully planned system of fighter intervention was misunderstood. 'The command at high level (i.e., Command/Air Staff)', wrote Schmid, 'is inflexible in its organisation and strategy'. He went on, 'As formations are rigidly attached to their home bases, command at medium level (i.e., Group/station), suffers mainly from operations being controlled in most cases by

98. See Cox, 'Intelligence', pp.11-12 and Wood and Dempster, pp.106-10.

99. See J.Nissen, *Winning the Radar War* (London, 1989), pp.33-37.

officers no longer accustomed to flying (station commanders)'. Possibly Schmid's conclusions were based on Signals interception of Fighter Command's radio telephone (R/T) messages, which he falsely believed would make the British defence system inflexible. (100)

His estimates of British fighter performance and production were also awry. He said, for example, that the Me.110 was superior to the Hurricane, no doubt to please Goering who had pinned great faith in that machine. This evasion of the truth proved very costly soon after the start of the battle, when the twin-engined fighter had to be protected by Me.109s. (101) The figures given for British fighter production were equally wrong, estimating between 180 and 300 aircraft per month, a total likely, in his reckoning, to fall under the pressure of bombing and shortages of materials. In reality, the figure, which had grown steadily from April, averaged between 450 and 500 aeroplanes from July to September. (102)

'The Luftwaffe is clearly superior to the RAF as regards strength, equipment, training, command and location of bases', the report claimed, going on to say that the German Air Force would be able 'to achieve a decisive result this year', if

100. See Wood and Dempster, p.109.

101. See AHB Translation, vol.9, VII/121, pp.7 and 18-19. See also Galland, *First and Last*, p.75.

102. See Overy, *Air War*, Table 3. See also M.M.Postan, *British War Production* (HMSO, 1952), p.485. Figures are from AIR 20/2307.

allowed to take advantage of the period of better weather from July to early October. (103)

Such errors of judgement contributed strongly and crucially to the policy of German leaders at the time. Hitler was encouraged to believe that weaknesses in the RAF would force the British Government to the conference table. Goering anticipated that Fighter Command would be crushed speedily and the remainder of the RAF within succeeding weeks. These misinterpretations of Britain's position help to explain why, at first, Hitler did not maintain the momentum of war after the defeat of France. Also they underline the value to British defences of the slow start to the Luftwaffe's campaign. (104)

Dowding, his Group commanders and pilots, were in a stronger position than many believed when the main German attacks began on 10 July. The fact of the matter was that the Luftwaffe had never been prepared adequately from pre-war days to defeat the Royal Air Force and force Britain to sue for peace through a bombing campaign. Their best chance of success, immediately after the evacuation from Dunkirk, had been allowed to pass. In many respects they had lost the Battle of Britain even before it began and any assessment of the strategy, tactics and leadership of Fighter Command is incomplete unless this point is taken into account.

* * *

103. OKL Intelligence Report, Operations Staff 1.C, 16 July 1940. See F.K.Mason, *Battle Over Britain* (London 1969), Appendix K.

104. See Overy, *Goering*, p.170, who writes of 'Goering and Hitler's exaggerated opinion of the air force'.

CHAPTER 3THE OPENING PHASE10 JULY - 18 AUGUST

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

The period from 10 July to 18 August marked the opening of the first stage of what is generally known as the Battle of Britain, but what should be called, in the opinion of some participants, the Battle for Britain.(1) This opening phase went far to disprove several impressions of the contest which have been widely held since and which, unfortunately, have clouded the issues of leadership during the battle.

The first was that only a handful of young pilots of Fighter Command were available to stand between the Juggernaut of the Luftwaffe and total Nazi victory. The impression of 'The Few' as a small band of British fighter pilots engaging German formations of overwhelming strength was caused not so much by an overall shortage of RAF aircraft as by Dowding's strategy of defence. At this stage he chose to keep as many Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons outside the main battle area as were retained in No. 11 Group, where the main blows were bound to fall.(2).

1. This point was made several times by Group-Captain H.S. Darley, who commanded No.609 Squadron during the battle. In his view, the change of preposition underlines the importance of the battle to Britain's ability to stay in the war. Interviews, Group-Captain H.S. Darley, Southborough, 14 March 1991 and 8 April 1991.

2. See K.G.Wynn, *Men of the Battle of Britain* (Norwich, 1989), p.2, who shows that the Battle of Britain clasp, awarded to those who flew in action with Fighter Command between 10 July and 31 October 1940 was received by 2,927 airmen. 'Contrary to popular belief "The Few" are not so few as many people think. A widely-held misconception is that the Battle of Britain was won by a few hundred dashing Spitfire pilots'. Those eligible came from 67 squadrons and two Flights.

Secondly, there were misconceptions over the resources available to Fighter Command. The reality was that while the German Air Force had more aircraft at its disposal than did the RAF, the advantage was considerably offset by the quality of the British defensive system. Fighter Command's squadrons fought a carefully prepared battle, using RDF and radio control, while the Luftflotten were engaged in bludgeoning attacks with no comprehensive strategy. Numbers alone gave the Germans little advantage. Even here, if the root of the battle is accepted as a contest between two sets of single-seater fighters, then the sides were almost evenly balanced. In addition, German lack of a heavy bomber seriously weakened the effects of attacks.(3)

Thirdly, it is important to appreciate that, in this phase, Dowding received more support from the Air Ministry than he was later prepared to acknowledge. Officers there have been awarded less recognition than deserved for their efforts.(4)

Fourthly, Fighter Command's tactics in action were patently inferior to those of the Luftwaffe. Although the recommendations made by pilots who had been in battle generally suggested the employment of larger, or differently arranged formations, the C-in-C was unprepared to approve. Subsequently, losses sustained in this period were unnecessarily high.

3. See above, Chapter 2, note 9. In the opinion of the head of the RAF's Air Historical Branch, the British were 'better at battle management' than the Germans. Lecture, Group-Captain I.Madelin, 'The Battle of Britain', Royal Aeronautical Society, London, 20 November 1990.

4. For an appreciation of the organisation, work and problems of the Air Ministry, see Dean, Chapter 14, 'The Air Ministry in Wartime and some of its Problems', pp.180-202.

Fifthly, both sides suffered from poor Intelligence. However, this affected the German Air Force more than the RAF, especially because seaborne invasion plans were still vague and indefinite, bringing greater pressure on the Luftwaffe as the number of possible landing dates declined.

The final factor during this period, and one whose importance should not be underestimated, was the value to Dowding of continuing political support. At the time, both Churchill and Beaverbrook, although not examining closely the tactics of battle, were content that Dowding's strategy was enabling Fighter Command to hold off German attacks.

* * *

PART TWO: DOWDING'S DEFENSIVE STRATEGY

The inherent weaknesses of the Luftwaffe on 10 July were either unknown, or not fully appreciated in Britain. There the sense of foreboding was great, although tempered by a grim determination not to allow the enemy an easy passage to victory.(5) Nevertheless, the shield afforded by the sea, which had prevented the Germans from turning the land attack on to Britain immediately after the defeat of the French, had enabled British leaders to take stock on two vital issues over the preceding six weeks. These issues marked the outline of the Government's overall aims, which the strategy of the RAF, and in particular that of Fighter Command, had to attempt to implement.

They were summarised by Air-Commodore Slessor, Director of Plans (D.Plans) at the Air Ministry, referring to a Joint Planning Committee (JPC) paper produced on 24 May. 'We had been asked', he recollected, 'whether Britain could hold out until help from the Empire and the United States became effective, and whether we had any chance of defeating Germany'. In his view, the crux of the answer to the first question was the capacity to replace fighter wastage, which would bring - or lose - air superiority. On the second point, he believed that Germany might be defeated by three factors - attack from the air, economic pressure, and revolt in the defeated countries.(6)

5. See, for example, the broadcast made by Neville Chamberlain, then Lord President of the Council, on 30 June 1940. The Channel was a 'formidable anti-tank obstacle' and the Royal Navy 'vastly superior to the German'. Even if the German Army were to land, 'it still has to be supplied, in the main at any rate by sea'. *Keesings Contemporary Archive*, vol.iv, p.4127.

6. Slessor, p.298.

In reporting to the Prime Minister on 25 May the Chiefs of Staff, whose RAF representative was Sir Cyril Newall, reached a number of conclusions. The main one was that while the RAF was in existence, the Navy and Air Force in unison probably had the power to prevent seaborne invasion. If, however, the Germans gained air superiority, the Navy would not be able to stop landings 'for an indefinite period'. Then, German land forces would get ashore and the British Army would be 'insufficient to deal with a serious invasion'.(7)

The next point underlined the burden laid on the RAF and especially on Fighter Command under Dowding's leadership. The crux of the problem, they suggested, was air superiority and if the Germans gained that, they could attempt to win by aerial attack alone.

They then showed a resurgence of the fears that had lurked since pre-war days, namely that the morale of civilian populations could be broken by bombing. In their ninth paragraph they referred to the 'moral effect on the workpeople' of 'wholesale havoc and destruction', while in the tenth they mentioned 'moral damage within the industrial area' resulting from attacks on the aircraft industry. To underline the belief that the fears of the working-class knew no national frontiers, the Chiefs of Staff stated that a British bomber force could attack German industrial centres and 'by moral and material effect' disrupt or destroy them. Their summary defined the real test as being whether

7. COS Paper No.168 of 1940, 27 May 1940, quoted in Churchill, ii, pp.78-79.

Service and civilian morale would be able to withstand the advantages possessed by Germany.(8)

The onus thrown on to the RAF was double-edged. Fighter Command was not only to hold off enemy attacks on Service positions and establishments, but also was required to guard civilians whose will to continue the war might well be broken by aerial bombardment. In view of what had happened in Spain, Poland, the Low Countries and France, the view was understandable.(9)

And yet, even at this crucial moment, with the strong possibility of German landings, the basic difference in strategic thought between, on the one side, the Air Staff and a number of politicians, and on the other, the Commander-in-Chief, Fighter Command, were demonstrated. For him, their earlier neglect of the importance of ensuring the safety of the Home Base through the agency of Fighter Command verged on the criminal. They, nevertheless, had a wider view of strategy, realising that attack is often the best method of defence.

Prominent among the supporters of this latter view was Churchill himself. Writing to General Ismay on 4 June, with the disaster of Dunkirk hardly completed, he was already suggesting that raiding forces might be used to attack German occupied coasts.

8. Churchill did not want the general public to be unduly alarmed. See Gilbert, vi, pp.602-03, quoting Churchill papers 20/13, Minute of 26 June 1940, to Duff Cooper. People should take raids 'as if they were no more than thunderstorms'.

9. See below, Chapter 6, 'Night Air Defence', for the effect of bombardment on British civilians at the end of the year.

A 'defensive habit of mind', he announced, which had ruined the French, should not be allowed to have the same effect on Britain. (10)

The thinking within the RAF was still at two levels. It was obvious by early July that Fighter Command held the key to Britain's immediate survival; therefore as many machines and pilots as possible were required to defend against Luftwaffe attacks. Nevertheless, there was still a strong caucus inside the Air Ministry dedicated to the Trenchard Doctrine of the offensive. Its members believed with a sincerity, sometimes later treated as stupidity, that attacks on German targets carried out by Bomber Command would make a significant contribution to Britain's defence. (11)

Group-Captain Stevenson, Director of Home Operations (DHO), summarised the dilemma on 28 June, when he wrote, 'We cannot hope to win the war without hitting and hitting hard. Therefore increases in the Bomber Force are absolutely essential'. He was, nonetheless, well aware of the current need for fighters. 'We must at all times have sufficient fighters to give security to the base and moreover, to provide the necessary air supremacy over areas in which our Bombers require to operate', he wrote,

10. Churchill, ii, p.214. See also Gilbert, vi, p.655, who quotes Churchill Minute to Herbert Morrison, Minister of Supply, 7 July 1940. 'What is being done about designing and planning vessels to transport tanks across the sea for a British attack on enemy countries?'

11. See Terraine, pp.141-44.

showing again the Air Staff's recognition of the importance of aggression as part of a defence strategy.(12)

The seeds of the growing difference between the Air Ministry under Sinclair and the Ministry of Aircraft Production (MAP) under Beaverbrook, can be felt here. The former believed that the development of the RAF required the building of as many bombers as possible, with the intention of striking at Germany. The latter saw as a prime need the construction of Spitfires and Hurricanes in large numbers to meet the immediate requirement of securing the Home Base. Those differences, compounded by Beaverbrook's highly individual approach to the achievement of aims and targets, made for a controversy which lingered on throughout the Battle of Britain. The uneasy relationship was a strong undercurrent in the story of Dowding's handling of resources during the battle, and played a not unimportant part in his subsequent dismissal.(13)

The Government's conception of the immediate strategic need was summarised by the Chiefs of Staff on 19 June. Their words underlined an awareness that the future of Britain's chances in

12. AIR 16/347, Expansion of the Home Defence Organisation, February-September, 1940, Note by Stevenson, DHO, 28 June 1940. See also Gilbert, vi, p.656, referring to Churchill's Minute to Sinclair, 11 July 1940. 'It is important to build up the numbers of the Bomber force, which is very low at the present time'.

13. For manifestations of the relationship, see Gilbert vi, pp.759-60 and p.811. See also Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/21, which shows both ministries jockeying for power over Aircraft Storage Units. BBK C/311 has a conciliatory letter from Sinclair to Beaverbrook, 15 June 1940. BBK D/390 contains Cabinet Minutes, 23 July 1940, 'Division of responsibilities between the Secretary of State for Air and the Minister of Aircraft Production'. See also Slessor, p.305 on divergences over priorities. For an appreciation from within the Air Ministry, see Dean, pp.137-38.

the conflict would be resolved in the short period between then and mid-September. 'The issue of the war', they stated, 'will almost certainly turn upon our ability to hold out during the next three months'. The importance of Fighter Command's part in the forthcoming action was demonstrated by their next words. 'Our efforts must therefore be concentrated on taking all steps necessary to meet the imminent threat of attack with which we are now confronted'.(14)

* * *

Such statements of policy focused attention on the importance of Dowding's responsibilities. A factor magnifying his difficulties at the start of the battle was the increased number of directions from which the enemy could now launch attacks. Pre-war planning had anticipated raids by unescorted bombers, aimed from a generally easterly or north-easterly quarter.(15) On 10 July, however, Luftwaffe aircraft were dispersed on airfields stretching round Britain in a great arc from Norway to north-west France. The closest of these airfields were in the Pas de Calais, enabling fighter protection to be given to German formations attacking south-east England.(16)

14. CAB 66/8, W.P.(40) 213, 19 June 1940.

15. See AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, Section 8, 'Fighter Policy, September 1939-May 1940'. In February 1939 Dowding's confidence in the ability of Fighter Command to meet unescorted bombers was shown when he wrote, 'It is my considered opinion that a bomber attack from Germany on this country would be brought to a standstill in a month or less'. He predicted 'terrible casualties' for them. See AIR 16/261, February 1939-July 1940, Correspondence with Chief of Air Staff, Dowding to Deputy Chief of the Air Staff, 24 February 1939.

16. A map showing clearly the closeness of German fighter aerodromes to southern England is given in Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, pp.80-81.

At this stage, one of Dowding's greatest problems was to decide on the disposition of his forces to meet responsibilities for the defence of targets varying from naval bases in northern Scotland, to London, and from convoys sailing in the Western Approaches, to East Anglian aerodromes. As he recollected less than a year after the battle, German objectives 'might be Convoys, Radio-Location Stations, Fighter Aerodromes, Seaports, Aircraft Factories, or London itself'. He went on to explain that their policy was to engage Fighter Command continuously, thus weakening it until the Luftwaffe had gained air supremacy.(17)

Although the fall of France brought a form of respite for the RAF, this was no more than an interval. In particular, German occupation of western France provided opportunities of attack on lightly defended targets on the western side of Britain which had not, in pre-war planning, been considered especially vulnerable. The coastal area from Portsmouth round to Bristol was now at particular risk. There was also the thought that a German invasion of Eire, as a forerunner to landings on the British mainland, might be carried out.(18)

17. AIR 8/863, p.4543, paragraph 7. Nonetheless, at this stage Leigh-Mallory showed a shrewder appreciation of German intentions than Dowding. At a conference on 7 July he predicted that the Luftwaffe would concentrate on southern airfields for about a week before invasion. Dowding believed that such attacks would last for only one day. See AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, pp.33-34.

18. However, an advantage for defenders of the western areas was that the short range of the Me.109 precluded its use there as an escort fighter. Gilbert, vi, p.577 refers to British fears regarding an invasion of Eire, discussed by the War Cabinet on 20 June 1940.

These worries added to Dowding's burden, but all too often the impression has been given that he carried it alone. Certainly, his was the particular responsibility for the fighter defence of Great Britain, yet the support afforded by officers in the Air Ministry is overlooked, or at best neglected. They, in turn, were pressed by requirements from the Chiefs of Staff, who had a broad view of what was needed from each Service, taking their instructions from the Cabinet. (19)

Thus, Group-Captain Stevenson wrote several times to Dowding in June, stating the Air Council's policy and decisions. For example, on 11 June he sought information on Fighter Command's intentions for extending defences in the west of England. (20) Seventeen days later the DHO wrote a review of fighter organisation resulting from the German occupation of France, including the prediction that Britain would 'lose the war unless we are able to secure our ocean convoys and our shipping in the Irish Sea'. (21) On the following day, Dowding was notified of Fighter Command's role in the event of an invasion. First, troop-carrying planes should be attacked, and then bombers.

19. *Ismay Memoirs*, p.159, shows the increasing importance of the role of the Chiefs of Staff who were, for the first time, 'in direct and continuous contact with the Head of the Government'.

20. AIR 16/347, Stevenson to Dowding, 11 June 1940. See also AIR 16/659, Enclosure 11A, Dowding to Joubert, 3 July 1940. Dowding showed his continuing mistrust of the Air Ministry. Referring to weaknesses in the defences of the West Country, he claimed that he had written on 2 February 'pointing out the new danger, but, in spite of repeated reminders, no decision was taken for three months. Furthermore, after resisting my recommendations for a year that runways should be built at Filton, they have now changed their mind and runways are being built, with the result that the aerodrome is out of action'.

21. AIR 16/347, DHO 'Review of fighter requirements in strength and organisation consequent upon the German occupation of France', 28 June 1940.

Cover should be offered to RAF bombers attacking enemy ground targets. Diversionary raids made by the Luftwaffe should not be met by too great a strength because 'the main objective of the fighters is to assist in repelling the invasion'.(22)

It was, nonetheless, a grim irony for Dowding that Stevenson's estimate of fighter numbers needed to meet the anticipated strength of the Luftwaffe and its potential now that the aircraft industries of several European nations had fallen under German control, was one hundred and twenty squadrons. These would constitute a first-line strength of 1,920 machines, between two and three times what was actually available to Fighter Command on that day.

At the same time plans were being pressed forward to form three new fighter Groups. No.10 would cover the West Country, No.14 the north coast of Scotland, while No.9 would defend the north-west of England.(23)

* * *

It is obvious that the Commander-in-Chief was greatly influenced by the width and variety of duties which had been pointed out to him by the Air Staff and whose onset, he would claim, they had failed to discern in good time. Also he had to bear in mind the

22. AIR 20/2061, January-July 1940, Fighter Command miscellaneous papers, Stevenson to Dowding, 29 June 1940.

23. See AIR 41/14, ADGB, i, pp.1-22.

strategic advantages which lay with the Luftwaffe, in their position as an attacking force with many airfields at their disposal from Norway to France.(24) There was the possibility at this stage that a seaborne invasion might be launched from any one or more of three general directions. Firstly, ships might cross the North Sea from Norway or the Baltic, to land forces on the east coast. Secondly, the Germans could use French and Belgian ports as bases for an attack on the south coast of England. Thirdly, they might sail from Brittany to invade Eire or the south-west coast of England.(25)

Therefore the disposition of the forces at Dowding's disposal at the start of the battle is of interest in demonstrating his anticipation of German intentions. An airman who flew at that time under his command pointed out that the Commander-in-Chief's freedom in this matter was extensive because 'no power on earth could have disputed his order without undermining his command responsibility, with all the implications inferred thereby'.(26)

On 8 July Fighter Command had 58 squadrons, although eight at the time were non-operational, either forming or re-forming. The following table shows how they were dispersed:

24. See, for example, ELMT 2/1, German Air Force Order of Battle, A.I.3b, 1 August 1940, in Elmhirst Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge. Group-Captain Elmhirst, then head of the German Section of RAF Intelligence, listed aerodromes where German fighters were stationed. Nevertheless, his estimates of numbers, being based on figures for Establishment, were exaggerated.

25. For thoughts, reports and worries of the time regarding invasion, see Hinsley, i, Chapter 5, especially pp.168-71. Here, the value of the Air Ministry's Photographic Reconnaissance Unit (PRU) is underlined.

26. Allen, *Who Won?* p.110.

GROUP	Hurricane	Spitfire	Defiant	Blenheim	Total operational	Total non operational	Grand Total
No.10	2(2)	2	-	-	4	2	6
No.11	12(1)	6	-	4	22	1	23
No.12	5(1)	5	1	2+ FIU Unit	13	1	14
No.13	3(4)	6	1	1	11	4	15
TOTALS	22(8)	19	2	7	50	8	58

(27)

27. The table is based on figures given in AIR 8/863, p.4560-61, Appendix "A". No.10 Group, with headquarters at Box, Wiltshire, took control of its squadrons on 18 July 1940. Until then, they were controlled by No.11 Group. However, Sir Peter Masefield, 'After The 120-Day Battle', in Aerospace (October, 1990), pp.16-21, has a more guarded view of numbers. He believes that on 1 July Fighter Command had available 858 aircraft, of which only 595 were serviceable. To fly them there were 1,054 pilots. (Table 1)

The dilemma facing Dowding at that stage is pointed out in the Air Historical Branch Narrative. Although the bulk of the German Air Force was stationed opposite to No.11 Group - 'no less than one thousand bombers and 400 fighters directly threatened the No.11 Group area' - the Luftwaffe could, by menacing other parts of Britain, cause the Commander-in-Chief to hold back forces from 'the main zone of operations'.(28)

Surprisingly, Dowding, in his Battle of Britain Despatch, makes little mention of his deployment of squadrons, or the strategic reasons for his arrangement of forces.(29) Nevertheless it is

28. AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.40.

29. Dowding's Despatch, AIR 8/863, contains a number of thinly veiled criticisms of Air Ministry policy. This is almost certainly the reason why the Despatch, written in 1941, was not published until after the war. See Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/440, note written for Beaverbrook, 4 February 1944, which referred to it as 'the record of a disappointed man'.

possible to delineate his restrictions of manoeuvre. He had to keep Fighter Command together as an organised fighting force, even if sometimes it would be unable to prevent enemy bombers from reaching targets. 'The destruction or paralysis of the Fighter Command', he wrote 'was therefore an essential prerequisite to the invasion of these Islands'. His prime task was to prevent that.(30)

For Dowding, a great problem was the shortage of pilots. The production or repair of aircraft was advancing at a satisfactory and improving rate by July 1940,(31) but the training of men to fly them was a far slower process. In addition, the depredations of the French Campaign had reduced not only the total of pilots, but more especially the number of experienced airmen.

On 1 July there were available, for all first-line squadrons, including those that were non-operational, a total of 1,103 fighter pilots. Their allocations were: No.11 Group- 553; No.12 Group- 228; No.13 Group- 322.(32). At this stage, in Dowding's appreciation, the fate of the nation depended on the skill and courage of about one thousand men. He was not alone in regretting the tardiness of the Air Ministry in supplying sufficient aircrew. Churchill noted, in a Minute to Sinclair on 27 June, 'the proved failure to provide a proper supply of

30. AIR 8/863, p.4543, paragraph 6.

31. See Gilbert, vi, pp.618-19, quoting PREM 3/38, folios 52-53, note from Beaverbrook, 30 June 1940. Beaverbrook claimed that 1,040 operational aircraft were ready for service, compared with 45 'when your Administration began'.

32. Figures given in Bowyer, p.56.

pilots when they have so long been crying out about a plethora of pilots'. He hoped that Sinclair would bring reform to 'a most cumbersome and ill-working machine'.(33)

Some help came from the Admiralty, who immediately searched units of the Fleet Air Arm for pilots. By July they were able to provide 58 airmen who then served under Dowding's command.(34)

The Commander-in Chief, believing that deficiencies of men and *matériel* precluded him from an aggressive use of resources, deployed squadrons in a conservative manner. Obviously, he, as much as Jellicoe in the Great War, saw the importance of his Command to the nation's survival. Another naval analogy, seen from the German side, is that Dowding valued Fighter Command as a 'Fleet in Being'. He wished to avoid a Jutland which could demolish his strength in one blow. His aircraft were therefore arranged with a balance of types of machine maintained among all Groups.

His strategy in this respect has been open to some, though generally muted criticism. Yet it led, in part, to the development of the Big Wing Controversy and to accusations that Dowding should have displayed more flair and aggression in opposing the Luftwaffe. He was implementing the policy of response planned before the war to meet raids from unescorted

33. Minute, Churchill to Sinclair, 27 June 1940, given in Gilbert, vi, pp.605-06. For background to the problem, see Wood and Dempster, Chapter 3, 'The Trenchard Air Force', pp.210-11.

34. Of these 58 Fleet Air Arm pilots, nine were killed in the battle; see Hough and Richards, p.290. Wynn, p.2, lists No.804 and No.808 Squadrons of the Fleet Air Arm whose pilots were entitled to the Battle of Britain clasp.

bombers, although conditions were now crucially changed; German fighter bases were only thirty miles from southern England.

The weakness of his position is underscored by examining the advantages stemming from the Germans' choice of areas to attack.(35) Most writers and authorities therefore accept that the Commander-in-Chief had little option in this matter and fail to question his strategy. However, his policy led to extreme pressure being laid on No.11 Group even before the battle started. Park's twenty-two squadrons, comprising about 350 aircraft, were faced by some 1,400 fighters and bombers. This strain, particularly in August, led to dissension over tactics.

One of the chief criticisms of Dowding's strategy comes from a former Battle of Britain pilot, Wing-Commander R. Allen. Allen, while allowing that the C-in-C was influenced in his decision by others, for example, the Chiefs of Staff Committee, says that the deployment of the fighter force 'was to invite disaster'. In his view, Blenheim squadrons should have been moved north from No.11 Group and replaced by the eleven Spitfire squadrons available to Nos.12 and 13 Groups. 'Every Spitfire squadron in Fighter Command should have been based in the 11 Group area', according to Allen, who believed that Dowding would then have been meeting the principle of concentration of force with his best fighters.(36)

35. See AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.40. See also *ibid*, p.565. 'The wide deployment of the German Air Force, threatening almost the whole of the United Kingdom meant that defending fighters had to be stationed in parts of the country remote from the south-east'. The Narrative overlooks the fact that the crux of battle was bound to be in the south and that more single-engined fighters could have been deployed there.

36. Allen, *Who Won?* p.111.

Rather than agree that Dowding had to retain forces in the north to meet a possible attack, Allen argued that this emphasis 'shows no military logic of any kind'.(37) In support of this view, it has to be remembered that no raids on the north could have been escorted by Me. 109s, so fighters other than Spitfires could have been deployed there.

This leads to a salient point in the general criticism of Dowding's strategy and one which has grown in recent years. It is that the Commander-in-Chief failed to respond when the battle with which he was confronted proved not be the one for which he had planned and thus he allowed No.11 Group to bear a heavier burden than needed. In the opinions of two eminent officers who flew in the battle, pilots who were trained to meet raids by unescorted bombers coming mainly from the east never anticipated having to compete with escorted bombers flying from the south. One of the officers believed that Dowding should certainly have appreciated this by September and taken appropriate steps; in his view, there was a place for Big Wings.(38)

The point is summarised by a former Australian pilot. 'When the Low Countries and France fell, Fighter Command was outflanked ... If he had redrawn the Group boundaries to meet the new threat he could have had the attack spread between two Groups and taken the strain off 11 Group'(39)

37. Ibid, p.113.

38. Interview, Air Marshal Sir Denis Crowley-Milling, Bader Foundation, Shell House, London, 14 December 1989. Also, Broadhurst interview, 10 November 1989.

39. Hough and Richards, p.287.

The fact that authorities at the time, and many writers and commentators since, believed Fighter Command to be heavily outnumbered and no more than a thin blue line, clouds two important factors. The first is that Britain's defensive system was not composed exclusively of RAF fighters, but contained other forces, such as anti-aircraft guns and balloons. In the forthcoming battle they were to play a vital, and often underestimated part. The second is that, in spite of a comparative shortage of numbers, Fighter Command, through use of the planned response to attack, using such elements as Radio Direction Finding and the Observer Corps, was far more efficient in carrying out its role than the Luftwaffe was in trying to sustain an offensive. Largely through pre-war preparations, Fighter Command had a singular purpose; the German Air Force, however, lacked clear-cut objectives and failed, particularly in bombing policy, to maintain a constant and undivided aim.(40)

Taken together, these two factors go some way to redress the apparent imbalance between the two sides. They also show that if the David and Goliath analogy often made of the two sides is accepted, then the former was better and the latter less fearsome than customarily believed.

The value of a well-equipped anti-aircraft arm had been demonstrated during the German campaign against France and the

40. In Probert and Cox, p.18, Dr H.Boog states that 'the air offensive had been improvised strategically and tactically against an air defence which had consistently been strengthened and refined over the preceding four years'. See also *ibid*, p.97, where Air Chief-Marshal Sir Christopher Foxley-Norris, then a fighter pilot, states that the Luftwaffe's role as a tactical air force was not appreciated. 'Fighter Command, by contrast had just one purpose in life, namely to defend this country', a factor which was 'one of the invisible assets of the R.A.F.'

Low Countries. The *Flak* arm of the Luftwaffe was concerned to provide both defence of home targets and also of the Army in the field. Heavy casualties were caused to RAF bombers in the early days of the Western offensive, when attempts were made at low-level attacks. (41)

In Britain, anti-aircraft defences were part of an Army Command, and a branch of the Royal Artillery, yet the need for a vital co-operation and co-ordination between them and Fighter Command had long been recognised. The ensuing relationship between General Sir Frederick Pile, G.O.C.-in-C., AA Command, and Dowding was both cordial and fruitful, lacking many of the elements of controversy which soured business between the Commander-in-Chief and several of his peers and superiors in the Air Ministry. In his Despatch, Dowding pointed out that theoretically his was the responsibility for guns employed in the Air Defence of Great Britain, but 'this was little more than a convenient fiction'. His work was greatly eased by Pile's 'tact, patience and loyalty'. (42)

No one can deny the shortage of guns, a point later recalled by both Dowding and Pile in the manner used by many commanders to explain how their needs were ignored. However, such complaints

41. The efficient organisation of the German anti-aircraft system is shown in Price, *Luftwaffe Handbook*, Chapter 7, 'The Flak Arm'.

42. AIR 8/863, p.4546, paragraphs 47 and 48. See also Sir Frederick Pile, *Ack-Ack* (London, 1949), p.116, quoting his own memo to the War Office. 'If A.A. Command were handed over to the Air Ministry the responsibility from top to bottom would remain with one Service ... and proper co-ordination would result'.

can give an impression that lack of resources led to ineffectiveness and this was certainly not true of AA Command at that time.(43)

Pile recalled that in the Battle of Britain 'the R.A.F. played the predominant part', therefore it was to be expected that the lesser role taken by ground defences would fade from the public mind. Yet, he continued, without their help 'the Battle of Britain could not have been won by the fighter pilots, any more than the Battle of Alamein could have been won by the infantry and tanks without the gunners'.(44)

Dowding summarised the value of anti-aircraft gunfire under four headings. First, it could destroy or disable enemy aircraft; second, bomber formations could be broken up, to the benefit of waiting RAF fighters; third, the accuracy of enemy bombing could be dislocated; and fourth, shellbursts were good indicators of the enemy position for patrolling fighters.(45) He might well have underlined the important factor that gunfire, regardless of accuracy, was a great boost to civilians, who felt that they were being defended. Considering the fears over public morale, the value of AA Command should not be overlooked.(46)

43. AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.93, lists 'Holdings of heavy A.A. guns'. Contrast this with Pile, p.131, showing the number of guns he believed necessary for defence.

44. Pile. pp.132-33.

45. AIR 8/863, p.4563, Appendix C, col.1.

46. Pile, p.120. An example of the value to morale is in Ministry of Information, *Roof over Britain* (HMSO, 1943), p.50, quoting a widely heard remark, 'I never slept so peacefully in my life as when I heard those guns booming!'

The seven AA Divisions employed were intended particularly to protect the aircraft industry. At the same time they were deployed to support the four Groups of Fighter Command and their success in shooting down enemy aircraft was acknowledged by Dowding. Whether or not the figures he gave for their success are accepted is immaterial; their contribution was immense and one which underscores the point that Britain's air defence was not so weak as often claimed. (47)

A further, and often unmentioned defence was offered by Balloon Command. Under the leadership of Air Vice-Marshal O.T. Boyd, from headquarters at Stanmore, the Command controlled about 1,400 balloons in July 1940; roughly 450 were placed to defend the capital. Their particular value as a deterrent to low-flying aircraft, especially to dive-bombers, will not appear from the number of enemy planes they destroyed, a negligible figure, but rather from the number of attacks which their very presence prevented. In addition, they were a visible defence and thus a boost to civilian morale. (48)

The second underestimated factor in favour of Fighter Command at the start of the battle was the planned efficiency of response to raids. Many books note that the employment of RDF interception and Sector control of squadrons, together with the accuracy of reports from the Observer Corps, came as a surprise to the Luftwaffe. (49) Few, however, have pointed out that

47. AIR 8/863, pp.4564-65, Section 7, cols.2 and 1, shows that No.6 AA Division, with No.11 Group, shot down 221 enemy aircraft between July and October 1940. These were Confirmed, Category 1.

48. See D.J.Smith, 'Balloon Barrages', in *The Blitz: Then and Now*, vol.1, edited by W.G.Ramsey (London, 1987), pp.86-95.

49. See above, Chapter 2, notes 99 and 100.

the 'Dowding System' went far to alleviate the imbalance of numbers between the two sides. The British plans were worth the equivalent of many fighter squadrons to the RAF. (50)

The system depended greatly on the acceptance and transfer of information by means of radio, telephone and telegraph. Although there were delays in obtaining equipment and some weaknesses in practice both before and during the battle, the pioneer work carried out over the previous fifteen years gave Fighter Command a considerable advantage over the German Air Force in 1940. This under-praised area of the organisation helped to give Britain then the world's best system of aerial defence. The Luftwaffe still had all the advantages of the attacker; they could choose the time and place to strike. However, this superiority was considerably offset by the speed and efficiency of the methods of communication available to Fighter Command.

In essence, the system offered RAF fighters the greatest blessing they could have demanded - speed of response. This was of the highest importance to a defence unable to afford wasteful standing patrols; it was of particular assistance to No.11 Group where there was usually very short warning of the enemy's approach. (51)

50. For workings of the 'Dowding System', see AIR 8/863, pp.4547-48, paragraphs 68-86, and also Wood and Dempster, Chapter 10, pp. 170-85. Also see A.Andrews, *The Air Marshals* (London, 1970), pp.107-08. Kreipe, the Chief Operations Officer of Luftflotte III later wrote, 'Radar at least doubled the efficacy of their own fighter force'; Richardson and Freidin, pp.16-17.

51. See Robinson, p.24, who shows that 'well-established Kent radar stations' could give about twenty minutes warning of attacks. However, under the best conditions it would take that long for the plot to be received and a Hurricane squadron to be scrambled to reach 20,000 feet.

Consequently, a new assessment is needed of the relative strength of the two sides. It shows that, as so often in history, numbers alone were of no more extensive value than a prepared plan. The pilots of Fighter Command were generally well rehearsed and supported in their duties; those of the Luftwaffe were not. In Terraine's words, the British scheme was 'a delicately interlocking net of communications and responsibilities, comprising a carefully tuned instrument of war'.(52) Overy has pointed out that only massive German bombing attacks, carried out with vastly superior numbers, could have defeated 'the technical and organisational advantages enjoyed by the RAF.'(53) Even before the main fighting began, such factors as the lack of heavy bombers, weaknesses in strategic leadership and deficiencies in controlling aircraft in action, ensured that the Luftwaffe was unable to match the criteria demanded for success.

* * *

British strategy, no less than German, relied heavily on Intelligence reports and assessments. It is enlightening to explore briefly, in a manner avoided by most books about the Battle of Britain, what resources of knowledge of the enemy were open to the Air Ministry at that time.

There was evidence available from four types of German signals traffic. First came high-grade cyphers, the Enigma; second were

52. Terraine, p.180.

53. Overy, *Air War*, p.32.

low grade Wireless Telegraphy (W/T) messages, usually from aircraft; the third consisted of low-grade R/T traffic; the last was more general traffic, for example navigational beacons.(54)

The RAF's main interception station at Cheadle was well experienced by this stage, having listened to low-grade Luftwaffe W/T traffic, whose security was not strong, since 1935. The RAF radio intelligence service (the 'Y' service) was able to build a composite picture of the strength of various Luftwaffe units.(55)

However, Air Intelligence, a separate Directorate within the Air Ministry,(56) had from pre-war days overestimated the power of the German Air Force. They gave reports frankly, without the constraints experienced by their rivals in the Luftwaffe; yet although their figures and recommendations were sometimes treated with scepticism by some senior officers, their predictions helped to reinforce the Air Staff's belief that the Germans were capable of launching a 'knock-out blow' by means of a concentrated bombing campaign. This fear had also occupied Dowding's mind from his earliest days at Fighter Command and affected his prepared strategy of response.(57)

54. See Cox, 'Intelligence Analysis', p.6.

55. The work of the 'Y' service is explained in A.Clayton, *The Enemy is Listening* (London, 1980). However, the work done at Cheadle is questioned by Edward Thomas in Probert and Cox, pp.42-46, 'The Intelligence Aspect'. See also Hinsley, i, pp.179-80.

56. See Hinsley, i, pp.11-12.

57. AIR 40/2321, Summary of minutes and papers written by heads of German section of Directorate of Intelligence (A.I.3) and Deputy Director of Department (D.D.I.3), September 1939-December 1940. Both Douglas and Slessor noted disbelief in some pre-war estimates. Wark, 'Intelligence 1933-39', *HJ*, 25,3 (1982), p.648, suggests that British air intelligence officers 'failed to climb into the skulls of their German opponents'.

A crucial revision of their estimates was not made until a few days before the air battle opened. By the time the information reached Dowding, it was late for him to revise strategy, even if the unlikely assumption is accepted that he would have been prepared for last minute, radical alterations.

During an investigation into technical matters, made from June, Professor Lindemann, the Prime Minister's close confidant and scientific adviser, had been suspicious of the Air Ministry's estimates of German bombing capabilities.(58) They had stated that the Germans could employ 2,500 bombers, delivering 4,800 tons of bombs daily, a threatening danger to Britain's chances of survival. Lindemann's enquiries brought realism to the world of Air Intelligence's fantasy. He met Group-Captain T. Elmhirst, head of A13, the German Section, on 5 July and received explanations that showed the slender hypotheses on which the figures were based. Having been compelled to examine their theories more vigorously, Air Intelligence produced revisions which reduced the number of bombers to 1,250 and the daily load to 1,800 tons.(59)

58. See Hinsley, i, p.177.

59. See AIR 40/2321, Minute 77, which shows that Elmhirst's predictions were based upon 80% of German bombers carrying a full load and on some making two sorties a day. He added four provisos. One effect of the predictions was that Dowding, on 27 July, 'estimates that one mass raid of 3,000 machines could be launched against us'. *Colville Diaries*, p.203. In reality, on 10 August, according to German QMG documents, the Luftwaffe had a total of 2,550 of all types in action. AHB Translation, vol.2 No.VII/39, 'The Battle of Britain', Appendix A.

It was little wonder that the new totals, emanating from Enigma interpretations, enabled the Air Staff to 'view the situation much more confidently than was possible a month ago'.(60) The great pity was that the exaggerated figures had remained, like a folklore, for so long. They had bolstered fears within the Air Ministry of the effects of Luftwaffe attacks; these, in turn, had affected Dowding's strategic arrangement of forces.

Where Air Intelligence was closer to the mark was in two other fields which were of use to the thinking and planning of Fighter Command. First, there was a conviction that the Germans would attempt no landing before gaining air superiority, a belief that underlined the importance of Dowding's role.(61) The second, using Enigma decrypts, was the provision of good advance warning of the forthcoming battle. For example, a Minute of 28 June warned that most German bombers would be refitted by 8 July and 'the opening of the offensive on this country must be anticipated from 1 July onwards'.(62) Such information helped the Commander-in-Chief plan his response.

Nonetheless, it is vital in assessing Dowding's contribution to both strategy and tactics in his Command at this time to be clear on one issue incorrectly described in at least three books. The authority of the writers has magnified the error. Did Dowding receive direct information from Enigma?

60. AIR 40/2321, Minute 77. See also Hinsley, i, p.177, note 5. This news may have prompted Churchill's letter to Beaverbrook, regarding the bombing of Germany. See above, Chapter 1, note 143.

61. See Hinsley, i, p.177. Also see AIR 40/2321, Minutes of 11,14,15 and 30 May 1940.

62. Ibid, Minute, 28 June 1940.

The truth is provided by Hinsley, who states, of Enigma, that 'the deductions were of no operational value to the C-in-C, Fighter Command'. Later, he adds categorically that 'for all his major decisions C-in-C, Fighter Command accordingly depended on his own strategic judgement, with no direct assistance from the Enigma'.(63)

The fallacy, based first on Group-Captain F.Winterbotham's claim, was that a sound-proof cubicle was installed at Headquarters, Fighter Command and that Dowding received direct information from Enigma. According to Winterbotham, a senior Air Intelligence officer, both Dowding and Park were able to benefit from a foreknowledge of German actions.(64) The claim was supported by historians as eminent as Ronald Lewin(65) and John Terraine.(66) However, the record was set straight by Martin Gilbert, who showed that not until 16 October 1940 was the Commander-in-Chief added to the list of those who were privy to Enigma.(67)

Wing-Commander H.Ironside, Dowding's Personal Assistant in October and November, cannot recollect a soundproof cubicle at Headquarters, Fighter Command. Although close to the C-in-C during day-to-day activities, he cannot remember Dowding receiving covert information from any source there.

63. See Hinsley, i, p.178.

64. F.Winterbotham, *The Ultra Secret* (London, 1974), pp.65-80. Even MRAF Sir John Slessor was taken in by Winterbotham's claim. See *ibid*, p.15.

65. R.Lewin, *Ultra Goes to War* (London, 1978), pp.84-87.

66. Terraine, pp.178-79.

67. Gilbert, vi, p.849.

Lewin, relying on Winterbotham's fallible memory, claims that Dowding received advance warning from Enigma of German attacks on the north of England on 15 August. This was highly improbable. Sir Kenneth Cross, then on the staff of No.12 Group, remembers that Leigh-Mallory that day was not at his headquarters, but visiting an aerodrome when the raids took place. It is difficult to believe that had Dowding received forewarning of those attacks he would not have advised his Group commander, who would then have stayed at his headquarters.

Similarly, on 7 September Park was not at Headquarters, No.11 Group when the first heavy daylight raids were made on London, but in conference with Dowding. It is unlikely that, had they known the Luftwaffe's intentions, the meeting would have been held. Edward Thomas suggests that Winterbotham's fabrications stemmed from lack of access to papers, his poor memory when writing - 'he was over 70 years old' - and the fact that 'he made up a good deal'.(68)

Therefore the importance of Air Intelligence's exaggerated predictions of German capabilities must be borne in mind when assessing Dowding's deployment of forces. Their effect on his caution as a 'counter-puncher' may then be recognised. This led to a conservation of resources destined to bring No.11 Group under extreme pressure by late August.

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68. Ironside interview, 27 August 1989; Lewin, pp.84-87; Cross interview, 25 September 1989; Probert and Cox, p.64; Hinsley, i, pp.178-79; P.Calvocoressi, *Top Secret Ultra* (London, 1980), pp.71-72.

PART THREE: TACTICS IN BATTLE

At the start of the Battle of Britain German tactics of fighter warfare were superior to those of the RAF. This point has been made by a number of Luftwaffe pilots and by many who served in Fighter Command.(69) As the responsibility for tactical preparation of airmen lay with the Air Ministry, and particularly with Dowding, it is revealing to examine the steps taken to provide pilots with the best advice.

The tactics used by Fighter Command were written in its bible of warfare, the Training Manual. The lines for engaging in combat were laid down, yet some pilots found difficulty in allowing for rapid changes to the design and performance of machines during the later 1930s. This is not surprising. They had learned to fly on biplanes whose performance was inferior to those of the Hurricanes and Spitfires introduced just before the opening of war. Their conception of air tactics came from aircraft which took longer to climb and reach the enemy and then carried smaller fire-power when engaging.(70) Having no actual experience in action, unless they had taken part, for example, in operations against tribesmen in distant parts of the Empire, their approach was a parade-ground exercise, unrelated to the reality shortly awaiting them.

As an example, the Royal Air Force Training Manual of 1933 set out a series of principles to which no aspiring pilot could take

69. See above, Chapter 2, notes 38-40.

70. See above, Chapter 1, note 57.

exception. Air superiority is gained 'by the pursuit of a policy of relentless and incessant offensive against the enemy's air forces in the air and on the ground', and, 'the importance of accurate marksmanship cannot be over-estimated'. Again, 'Altitude confers a tactical advantage upon the attacker', and 'an attack should be delivered with caution, but once attempted should be driven home with resolute determination to destroy the enemy'. (71)

However, these instructions were provided for men whose aircraft were in design and performance little more than updated versions of First World War biplanes. The Demon, a two-seater version of the Hart bomber, went into service in April 1933. At a ceiling of 15,000 feet its maximum speed was 181 m.p.h., with an armament of three machine-guns. The Gladiator, best of the pre-war biplanes, which came to the RAF as late as 1937, by which time it was already obsolescent, could manage 250 m.p.h. and carried four machine-guns. (72)

On such machines, the drill of flying close 'Vic-three' formation was an immutable law, with the two wing pilots giving undivided attention to holding their correct position in relation to the leader. Many airmen complained that such practice equipped them well for the annual Hendon Air Display, while giving no conception of the tactics required in modern war. The writers

71. Air Ministry, *Royal Air Force Training Manual, Part II, Applied Flying*, Air Publication 928 (February, 1933), notes 2, 25, 85 and 104. For a visual presentation of the attacks, see R.T.Bickers, *The Battle of Britain* (London, 1990), pp.97-102.

72. Gunston, pp.51-63, gives an account of the development from biplane to monoplane fighters in all major air forces during the 1930's.

of the Instructions, themselves without experience of air combat in fast monoplanes, were at a loss when the accepted wisdom of the Training Manual had to be updated.(73)

There was little time before the outbreak of war either for tutors to compile a manual based on practical knowledge of the capabilities of the new monoplane fighters, or for squadrons to practise the suggested tactics, or even to evolve their own. The first Hurricane flight did not take place until 6 November 1935 and these aircraft did not come into squadron service until December 1937. The Spitfire's introduction was even later. Its test flight was on 5 March 1936 and No.19 Squadron received the first aircraft in August 1938.(74)

The section on 'Air Fighting Tactics' in the 1938 Manual made several suggestions unproven by experience. 'Manoeuvre at high speeds in air fighting is not now practicable, because the effect of gravity on the human body during rapid changes of direction at high speed causes a temporary loss of consciousness'. The instruction stipulated that 'single-seater fighter attacks at high speed must be confined to a variety of attacks from the general direction of astern'.

73. Allen, *Who Won?*, p.72, points out that 'the Trooping of the Colour on Horse Guards Parade has little enough to do with the formations adopted by the Grenadier Guards in fighting such actions as the Battle of the Falaise Gap. Similarly, the formations adopted by the fighters over the Hendon aerodrome had nothing whatsoever to do with the tactical formations which should have been employed in action'.

74. See J.Quill, *Spitfire* (London, 1985), p.122. 'On 4 August 1938 ... I flew it [K9789] to Duxford and handed it over to Squadron-Leader H.I.Cozens, CO of 19 (Fighter) Squadron. The two Duxford squadrons, 19 and 66 then equipped with Gauntlets, were to become the first two Spitfire squadrons'.

To carry out the suggested attacks, sections of three fighters were expected to maintain a 'vic' formation and, at the command of a leader, fly into action. As an example, Attack No.1 was planned for the interception of a single bomber by three fighters; Attack No.2 presumed that an enemy bomber formation was intercepted by two sections of fighters. Both attacks, coming from dead astern, with no-deflection shots, were adequate for dealing with unescorted bombers; they were poor preparation for the reality of August 1940 when combat involved tackling enemy fighters protecting bombers in an aerial screen.(75)

A further point lacking general recognition in subsequent controversies over leadership is that throughout the French campaign and over the following month, efforts were made by Headquarters, Fighter Command, to learn some lessons about tactics and to disseminate information received. Some was of great practical value and demonstrates that attempts were made to formulate the best methods of attack and defence. Dowding and Park showed, in certain directions, more initiative than some of their adversaries later gave them credit for. What was disappointing was that some recommendations were not advocated strongly to squadrons.

For example, a signal sent from Headquarters, Fighter Command to all Groups on 19 May advised 'Following hints received from a squadron just returned from France. Begins (1) Avoid close formation on way to rendez-vous or objective. (2) Aircraft in

75. See Air Publication 928, Chapter 8, and AIR 16/74, Fighter Command attacks, 1938. Deere, p.34, summarised a general belief. 'These attacks provided wonderful training for formation drill but were worthless when related to effective shooting'. Spick, pp.46-51, assesses the Attacks, of which there were five.

formation or singly never fly straight but keep turning in order to watch behind and above. (3) If possible do not attack without above guard'. (76)

Signals sent to Group Headquarters two days later advised that Wing-Commander Vasse would visit No.11 Group stations and Wing-Commander Broadhurst those of Nos.12 and 13 Groups 'within the next three days to discuss Fighter tactics with Sector and Squadron commanders based on experience to date of German methods'. (77)

Responses to Vasse's visits are enlightening. Although they refer to combat over France at that time, basic principles of air tactics were raised, which would come up again when battles were being fought in British skies. On 25 May, Group-Captain Carnegie, G/C, Ops.1 at Headquarters, Fighter Command, wrote a Minute for the Senior Air Staff Officer (SASO), who then passed it to Dowding. Carnegie reported 'the unanimous opinion that larger formations are essential' and recorded that War Tactics, at the Air Ministry, had approached him on the matter. It was better 'to go over in large numbers less frequently than in small numbers more often', which would damage German morale and shoot down more bombers. He asked for comments and re-iterated 'the emphasis which was placed on the necessity for larger formations'. At the side, Dowding wrote 'Agree'. He well

76. AIR 16/281, Fighter Tactics, part 1, February-November 1940, Enclosure 14A, 19 May 1940.

77. Ibid, Enclosures 17 and 18A, 21 May 1940.

realised the value of using Wings of fighters, when the circumstances were right, an opinion held by many pilots, as well as by officers in the Air Ministry.(78)

Dowding's desire to spread information is shown by his handwritten note, translated into a Signal from Headquarters, to all Groups on 3 June. 'Three Groups. I want all pilots who have constructive ideas as to tactical methods arising out of recent fighting to have an opportunity of submitting them. Groups should filter the suggestions and send on the most promising for consideration at Command H.Q.' (79)

In June, Fighter Command Tactical Memorandum No.8 was issued. It was important as an attempt to provide guidance for squadrons now that German bombers could fly over parts of Britain with fighter escorts, a new dimension for RAF pilots, whose training was for specific attacks on unescorted bombers. The document started optimistically, claiming that 'under conditions of Home Defence, where a highly organized system exists, the task of our Air Force should be simplified'. This reinforced belief in the Dowding System, carefully prepared, calling for a disciplined riposte to attacks, a response made strictly under orders.

78. Ibid, Minute 28, G/C Ops.1 to SASO, 25 May 1940. See also Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/330, note from Harold Balfour, Under-Secretary of State for Air, to Beaverbrook, 29 May 1940. Balfour visited No.601 Squadron on their return from France and reported their view that they could tackle anything if they had sufficient numbers. 'Pilots feel it unfair that they should have to go out in, say, a dozen, when they are liable to meet forty or fifty enemy fighters'. With anything approaching equality, however, they were confident of success. The report reveals Balfour's interest in tactics. Later, within the Air Ministry and, it must be suspected, through political pressure, he supported the protagonists of Big Wings and helped remove Dowding. See below, Chapter 7.

79. AIR 16/281, Enclosure 43A, H.Q., Fighter Command, to H.Q., all Groups, 3 June 1940.

Under THE AIM, the Memorandum stated that Britain's ability to continue the war depended on the success of fighters in protecting 'vital centres, and especially those concerned with aircraft and food production'. Dowding crossed out those last two words. Then came his main aim. 'It must, therefore, be constantly borne in mind that our aim is THE DESTRUCTION OF ENEMY BOMBERS, and that action against fighters is only a means towards this end'.

Further details laid down conditions of attack. Fighters should patrol higher than enemy planes and an upper squadron should draw off escorts while a lower unit attacked the bombers. In protecting aerodromes it might be necessary not to engage enemy fighters 'who are in the nature of a decoy', but wait for the following bombers.

The 'Summary' contained eight points, seven of which were excellent practical advice, such as keeping a constant watch behind, and conserving ammunition. The final point contained the overall policy. 'Always remember that your objective is the ENEMY BOMBER'.(80)

Memorandum No.8 was a useful document, within the limitations of the contemporary experience, laying down principles which enforced Fighter Command's planning, and was not revised until November. However, it quoted ideal circumstances and when the battle developed, these did not always obtain, as, for example, when Luftwaffe fighters flew close by their bombers. Some pilots then had to devise their own tactics.

80. Ibid, Document 25A, 'Tactical Memorandum No.8 - Air Fighting: Fighters v. Escorted Bombers', June 1940.

Throughout June and July, Dowding was determined that instructions passed on to squadrons should come only from his Headquarters. Carnegie was worried that each Group would produce its own paper on tactics and minuted that No.11 Group had issued their own addition to 'Tactical Memorandum No.8'. 'As this was mainly a matter of repetition, Units of course are liable to look upon all such Memoranda as just so much more paper and accordingly it is possible that they are not read'.(81)

On 24 June Dowding minuted, 'S.A.S.O. Yes. Send copy to Air Ministry: and try to stop this Hints and Tips from going out except through us. D.'. (82) Two days after, a firm note to all four Groups stated that 'These Headquarters will, therefore, assume responsibility for issuing Tactical Memoranda as and when required'. They would consolidate reports sent in from Groups, who were ordered to 'refrain from issuing tactical instructions direct to Units'.(83)

Dowding here appeared to be showing firm leadership in his Command, ensuring that a pattern was laid down for all to follow. However, the order may be seen as too rigid a centralisation of control, taking freedom from the commanders of Groups by whom, under Dowding's planning, the battle was directly fought.

This point was made by Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Porter, then Deputy-Chief Signals Officer (DCSO) at Headquarters, No.11 Group

81. Ibid, Minute 60, G/C Ops.1 to SASO, 24 June 1940.

82. Ibid, Minute 62, Dowding to SASO, 24 June 1940.

83. Ibid, Enclosure 64A, H.Q., Fighter Command to Nos.10, 11, 12 and 13 Groups, 26 June 1940.

and is a matter that goes straight to the heart of the controversy over Dowding's leadership and tactics during the battle. In his view, the C-in-C at Stanmore did not influence the battle because he had no tactical command. Information was passed to him but he was in no position to use it. He watched while it was passed forward to his Group Commanders, who bore the immediate responsibility for tackling the enemy.(84)

* * *

It is important to note the date and content of the replies to the Memorandum of 3 June received from the three Groups involved, allowing for the fact that intensive German air activity built up from early July.

The first response came from AVM R.Saul, AOC, No.13 Group, on 7 July. He passed on the recommendation from two sources that squadrons should be organised into three sections, each of four aircraft, rather than the RAF's traditional pattern of four sections of three. 'When this formation was adopted', he continued, 'it was found that these sections of four aircraft could split into pairs (Nos. 1 and 3, and Nos. 2 and 4) for attack against isolated bombers or fighters. In several combats against enemy fighters the second aircraft of the pair was instrumental in shooting down Messerschmitt 109s, which were on the tails of the first aircraft'. No finer advice could have been offered to the pilots of Fighter Command. In essence, the

84. Interview, Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Porter, Bristol, 19 August 1991.

Luftwaffe system of the *Rotte* (pair) was being advocated, with a wingman guarding the leader's tail.(85)

Dowding, nonetheless, was slow to use the suggestion. In his Despatch, he stated that the 'organisation should allow for a break up into pairs, in which one pilot looks after the tail of his companion'. Yet this crucial point was never pressed strongly to squadrons. 'It was of course undesirable to make any sweeping change during the Battle', he wrote guardedly, although the change would have saved many lives. Writing of the suggestion that squadrons might have been split into two Flights of eight aircraft, each comprising two Sections of four, he commented unimaginationatively, 'This latter suggestion would upset standard arrangements for accommodation'.(86)

The value of the advice offered depended on the shrewdness of the squadron-leaders receiving it. Some changed tactical formation quickly, but others stuck to the traditional 'Vic-3' throughout the battle; the difference between those squadrons was, unfortunately, all too often reflected in their casualty rate.

For example, Group-Captain H.Darley, then O.C. No.609 Squadron, was a resilient leader who altered tactics. He introduced four Sections of three, all in line astern, with the fourth Section above and behind, preferably up-sun and a thousand feet above. As a pre-war instructor he believed that squadron discipline

85. AIR 16/281, Enclosure 68A, H.Q., No.13 Group to H.Q., Fighter Command, 7 July 1940. See also N.Franks, *The Air Battle of Dunkirk* (London, 1983), p.121, where the views of Squadron-Leader J.M.Thompson (No.111 Squadron) are recorded.

86. AIR 8/863, p.4558, paragraph 220.

was essential; a collective force had to fight collectively. By early October his squadron's results vindicated his tactics and his men stayed in the front-line throughout the battle.(87)

This should be compared with the experience of Pilot-Officer J.E.Storrar of No.145 Squadron. 'We kept by the book, in Vics, right through Dunkirk and the Battle of Britain and in August, 145 Squadron was virtually destroyed and had to be reformed at Drem'.(88)

Park's reply to the Memorandum was sent on 12 July, making the same point of re-arranging formations and naming the squadrons from which the idea emanated. Both No.54 and No.74 Squadrons had suggested the use of six pairs which, in a dog-fight, could 'operate as one offensive and one defensive aircraft'.(89)

As no response had come from No.12 Group by 17 July, Headquarters, Fighter Command sent an enquiry. The reason why Leigh-Mallory had failed to answer earlier is unclear, but a reply was sent on the following day. 'Your A.394 of 17 July; suggestions will be forwarded by 23 July'.(90)

87. Darley interviews, 14 March and 8 April 1991.

88. Franks, p.120.

89. AIR 16/281, Enclosure 73A, H.Q., No.11 Group to H.Q., Fighter Command, 12 July 1940.

90. Ibid, Enclosure 76A, H.Q., Fighter Command to H.Q., No.12 Group, 17 July 1940, and reply, 18 July 1940.

Their response arrived on 25 July and is remarkable in view of No.12 Group's later advocacy of Big Wings. For example, the opinion of the O.C., No.264 Squadron was enclosed, strongly opposing those formations. 'It is improbable that any three squadrons would be able to take off, form up and set off on a course in under twelve minutes. In which time an enemy formation would have covered 40 miles'. The slow speeds of the formation would give the enemy time to reach a target before being engaged. If new raids appeared, the Controller would have to split up the Wing to counter them. 'However good the ground direction and R/T may be I do not feel that such methods would give the best results'.(91)

Another note, enclosed with No.12 Group's reports, was a paper, 'Single Seater Fighter Tactics', submitted by the O.C., No.19 Squadron, Duxford on 22 June. He was a further convert to the use of pairs in combat. The pilots should maintain line astern, which had proved to be successful, and 'in point of fact, two pilots who adhered to this system throughout the patrols met with considerable success and were themselves unscathed'.(92)

It is noteworthy that, at this stage, No.12 Group were making no strong recommendations on the advisability of employing Wings of at least three squadrons to meet German attacks. However, over the following month, as German raids grew in intensity and the

91. Ibid, Enclosure 88A, H.Q., No.12 Group to H.Q., Fighter Command, 25 July 1940.

92. Ibid.

pilots of No.11 Group came under increasing strain, those on the fringes of battle examined the role of squadrons stationed in other Groups.

* * *

One of the greatest ironies of the later controversy over the tactical use of fighters is that no commander at that time was more experienced in their employment than Air Vice-Marshal K.Park. A particular gain made by the RAF during the French Campaign was the opportunity of command in action presented to him. Through controlling squadrons under battle conditions he learned lessons that served him well over subsequent months. It has not been generally acknowledged or admitted that he appreciated the value of employing Wings of fighters when circumstances were considered appropriate. Indeed, that was his policy during the later stages of the Dunkirk evacuation.

On 8 July he wrote No.11 Group's report on action that had occurred during the French Campaign. A fortnight later, Dowding sent the report, with his own comments, to the Under-Secretary of State for Air. He wrote, 'The report is of interest, although I cannot endorse all the opinions expressed'.(93)

In paragraph 22, Park explained how his squadrons had been organised. While they were operating from bases in France, he pointed out, and were on escort duty or flying patrols, they

93. The report, including Dowding's comments, is in AIR 2/7281, Fighter Command tactics against German Mass Formations, 1940, Enclosure 12A, Dowding to Under-Secretary of State for Air, 22 July 1940.

'were employed singly or by flights'. Nonetheless, at the next stage, when the Allied armies were in retreat, the tactics of No.11 Group were changed. 'At first squadrons were employed singly, but as soon as it was learned that the enemy was operating in large formations, pairs of squadrons were employed with good effect'.

Park then underlined the dilemma of this policy, because 'cover could not be maintained continuously over the Allied armies. 'It seriously reduced the number of hours that our fighters could be on patrol'.

In the following paragraph he claimed that, at the start of the Dunkirk evacuation, 'the Air Ministry ordered continuous weak fighter patrols throughout the 18 hours of daylight', a comment beside which Dowding pencilled a cross on his copy of the report. Park added, 'As forecast, this resulted in our squadrons suffering heavy casualties for small casualties in combat'. He went on to express clearly the merits of Big Wings, when used under favourable circumstances. After representations had been made to what he termed 'Higher Authority', (94) 'the Group was permitted to employ offensive fighter patrols at 2-squadron strength, leaving a few hours of daylight in which there were no patrols on the line'. Dowding made a pencil mark in the margin by the last point. The report continued, 'This resulted in less casualties to our fighters, and a marked increase in the number

94. 'Higher Authority' probably refers to Dowding. Orange, p.87, notes, 'It was only after urgent and repeated requests that Park secured Dowding's permission to employ squadrons two at a time and abandon attempts at continuous coverage'. Nevertheless, Hough and Richards, p.93, give the credit for using larger formations to the Air Staff, who suggested the idea to Dowding.

of successes in combat. When the enemy formations were from thirty to sixty bombers, closely escorted by formations of fifteen to thirty fighters, permission was obtained to employ offensive sweeps of four squadrons working in two pairs. Whenever possible, the upper pair of squadrons consisted of Spitfires and the lower pair of either Hurricanes, or Hurricanes and Defiants'. The paragraph finished by explaining that this policy led to more Luftwaffe, and fewer RAF aircraft, being shot down. (95)

Under the heading 'Tactics of our Fighters', Park criticised the lack of pre-war training for Fighter Command in seven important items. In order, he listed them as fighter v. fighter tactics; fighting in squadron or Wing formations; fighting escorted bombers; fighting at high altitude; deflection shooting; firing of ball ammunition at ground and air targets; shooting in short bursts. Beside the fourth, fifth and sixth of those items Dowding pencilled in question marks, either because he did not comprehend the point, or, more likely, that he disagreed with Park's criticism. (96)

95. Robinson, p.68, mentions fighters from Nos.41, 19, 222 and 616 Squadrons flying together 'in Wing strength' between 28 May and 4 June. Franks, p.17, quoted a pilot of No.17 Squadron. 'The German Air Force were now employing large numbers of aircraft together and, therefore, the AOC No.11 Group countered likewise. This rather dispels the myth that No.12 Group was the first to join squadrons together'. See also AIR 27/252, Operations Record Book (ORB), No.19 Squadron and AIR 27/424, ORB, No.41 Squadron.

96. However much Park criticised the training of pre-war squadrons and however well Dowding tried to avoid the criticism, the fact remains that this was a duty of Fighter Command for which they both had a special responsibility.

But the Commander-in-Chief marked each side of paragraph 46 in a double line of blue crayon, his standard procedure for reinforcing a strongly held belief. In this case he was probably applauding Park's blunt tilt at Dowding's own old adversaries on the Air Staff. 'The Air Ministry throughout the operations failed to appreciate the difficulties of operating large numbers of squadrons from forward aerodromes, resulting in frequent hasteners for patrol reports and advance combat reports', wrote Park in a style guaranteed to gain no friends on the Air Staff. 'This continual flow of enquiries from Higher Authority was a great embarrassment throughout the operations and at times so blocked the landlines that urgent operations orders were seriously delayed between the Group Headquarters and Squadrons at forward aerodromes'.

In the light of what was to follow, from late August, Park's report is an instructive document. He was the only senior commander involved to have real experience of using Big Wings in action. He, not Dowding, had immediate control of the tactical employment of the fighter force. Of the two main disciples of Big Wings, Douglas was at the Air Ministry, an interested and involved observer, but without direct command. Leigh-Mallory, even when the Duxford Wing flew in September, never controlled them to a set pattern over an area for which he had responsibility. From the point of view of practice, as opposed to theory, no one had a more legitimate right than Park to express opinions on the matter.

In addition, a far-reaching consequence of the French Campaign for both Park and Dowding, and one that affected greatly their subsequent attitudes, especially the efficacy of employing Big

Wings, was an appreciation of the threat posed by Fighter Command's losses on the other side of the Channel. To ensure the safety of the Home Base, neither man believed that he could afford profligacy with such a limited resource as the RAF's fighters. In their view, one ill-chosen foray over the homeland with fighters flying *en masse* could have incurred disastrous casualties at the level that the Germans were seeking to inflict. Such an approach was far removed from the nature of the conservatively-minded Dowding.

* * *

PART FOUR: LUFTWAFFE ATTACKS AND FIGHTER COMMAND'S RESPONSE

Authorities differ over the particular dates of the various phases of the Battle of Britain. Nevertheless, there is a general broad concurrence on both sides of the main developments.(97)

It is not the purpose of this study to make a detailed chronological examination of the events of the battle, but rather to explore some of the pressures, both technical and political, which affected commanders and pilots, bringing changes to the leadership, strategy and tactics employed.

Nonetheless, the usual selection of 10 July as the opening day is capricious. It does less than justice to those airmen involved in action after the fall of France, yet before that day, who were shot down, killed or wounded, and thus regarded in some quarters as not having taken part.(98) Probably the view held by some German writers that the battle was an indivisible part of the general Western Campaign is a more accurate assessment.(99) Secondly, for the end of this opening phase the date of 18 August has been chosen, the reason being that on that

97. Wood and Dempster give five phases; Hough and Richards give four; Robinson offers four; Galland, AHB Translation, vol.9, VII/121, divides the battle into six stages; Dowding, AIR 8/863, chooses four.

98. One example of many was the late Air Vice-Marshal G.Lott, O.C., No.43 Squadron. After actions from the outbreak of war to Dunkirk, Lott was shot down on 9 July. 'I tangled with a Messerschmitt 110 as a result of which I subsequently lost my right eye'. He was not entitled to the Battle of Britain clasp. Letter, AVM G.Lott, 8 August 1989.

99. See, for example, Kesselring Memoirs, Chapter 11.

day the Luftwaffe made an extensive effort to destroy what was believed, from its Intelligence reports, to be the small residue of fighters left in the RAF. The resulting aerial fighting led to heavier combined losses than those suffered by the Luftwaffe and the RAF on any other day of the battle. The Germans discovered that Fighter Command was stronger than they had been led to believe and at a conference called next day by Goering, commanders were told of a change in both strategy and tactics which, in the long run, was to help Fighter Command.(100) Additionally, the events of that day and the results of the conference led to a growth of the uneasy relationship between Nos.11 and 12 Groups, Fighter Command. Attitudes were sharpened in the Big Wing Controversy.

From the end of the French Campaign the German Air Force held, as its first and main strategic aim, the destruction of the RAF and especially of British fighters. They intended to do this basically over southern England. 'First of all success is to be achieved in the target areas of Luftflotten 2 and 3', Goering ordered at a conference on 21 July. 'Only a complete victory over the R.A.F. in southern England can give us the possibility of further attacks on enemy forces stationed in the depth of the country'.(101)

100. See Irving, *Rise and Fall*, pp.100-01, quoting Milch Documents: 65, pp.7251ff, Imperial War Museum. See also Collier Collection, Document 51, Goering conference, 19 August 1940.

101. Collier Collection, Document 51, Goering conference, 21 July 1940. See also U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, APO, Interview No.61, Collier Collection, Interview with Kesselring, 20 June 1945. Questioned about the battle, Kesselring gave these objectives. 'In the first place, the enemy air force. Secondly, seaports, thirdly, the enemy war production, and in the fourth place the attacks on London, which had hostile vital installations as targets'.

Therefore, the first raids were made against Channel shipping. Werner Kreipe, who took part in several of these attacks, recollected the Luftwaffe's double task. Hand in hand with the destruction of the RAF was to go 'the interdiction of the Channel to merchant shipping', which, he claimed, the British were still sending 'with characteristic imperturbability'.(102) In this way the Germans hoped to clear the Straits of all British ships, both naval and merchant, to control the crossing area for their own forces, when the time came.

The bombing of coastal shipping, and its protection, became, on the British side, a matter of understandable controversy, because of the commitment demanded from Fighter Command. On average, twelve convoys needed escorts every day and roughly one third of these received attacks. Consequently, great demand was placed, especially on No.11 Group, at a time when they were facing 'the bulk of the German Air Force'.(103)

The employment of convoys to carry supplies in the general area stretching from the Suffolk coast to Lyme Bay undid the value of using the sea as a protective screen for Britain. At that time far more goods could have been transported by railway, which

102. W.Kreipe, in Richardson and Freidin, pp.11-12.

103. AIR 41/15 ADGB, ii, p.78. Ibid, p.71, points out that fighting conditions 'were nearly all unfavourable to the defenders'.

would have been better protected by fighters. Nearly all action over the Channel placed the defenders at a disadvantage, because RDF could give little advance warning of raids.(104)

At a conference on 3 July Dowding asked for convoys to be redirected round the north of Scotland. He realised that not all could be adequately protected, yet on the 29th, after heavy German raids on Dover and the Straits, the Air Ministry instructed him to counter the enemy 'with superior forces and large formations'.(105) The shipping employed suffered regular losses, but by 9 August Churchill still wanted them as 'bait'. This led, however, to greater losses than Fighter Command should have been asked to bear.(106) This early phase receives scant attention in some accounts of the battle,(107) yet several deductions of its importance may be drawn. For both sides there were gains and losses.

104. Ibid, p.71. See also W.P.Crozier, *Off the Record, Political Interviews, 1933-1943*, edited by A.J.P.Taylor (London, 1973), p.182, Interview with A.V.Alexander of the Admiralty, 10.30 p.m., 26 July 1940. 'It might be extremely difficult to carry on such traffic in the face of combined m.t.b. and aeroplane attack, and his view was that it ought to be stopped and the goods sent by rail. "I've begged," he said, "that this should be done but so far without success."' Nevertheless, C.I.Savage, *Inland Transport* (HMSO, 1957), pp.214-21, shows the difficulties which would have resulted from transferring freight from coastal traffic to the railways.

105. See AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, pp.71-72, quoting Fighter Command Operations Record Book, 29 July 1940.

106. By 9 August Churchill recognised that 'the surviving bait are getting a little fed up'. *Colville Diaries*, 9 August 1940. See Gilbert, vi, p.718.

107. Collier, *Leader of the Few*, Chapter 20, and Wright, Chapter 10, give little detail or assessment.

The German effort at that time was undoubtedly hampered by cloudy weather, (108) yet a heavier burden for them was the indecision shown by their leaders. Not until 1 August did Hitler announce, in Directive No.17, that he intended 'the final conquest of England' and that the RAF was to be defeated 'in the shortest possible time'. He ordered the Services to be ready to launch the invasion on 15 September. (109) Also hampering the Luftwaffe campaign was the slowness of Goering's plans. He did not issue the final directive of the Operations Staff for *Adlerangriff* until 2 August. Its aim was to destroy the RAF in the same way that the Polish and French air forces had been removed. (110)

In air fighting, German tactics proved to be superior. Not only did RAF fighters flying out to protect convoys often find the enemy at greater height and in larger numbers, but also the employment of the vic-formation and Fighter Command Attacks led to considerable casualties. (111) The Germans also discovered that the Me.109, especially flown by an experienced pilot was a most competent fighter. (112) They proved finally the superiority

108. From 10-31 July, the Channel weather was shown as 'Fine' on four days only - 25, 28, 29 and 31 July. See Hough and Richards, pp.357-58; see also Wood and Dempster, pp.239-56; see also AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.36.

109. See Trevor-Roper, pp.37-38.

110. AHB Translation, vol.2, No.VII/26, 'The Course of the Air War against England', prepared by the 8th Abteilung, 7 July 1944.

111. For a retrospective and highly critical revue of tactics, offered by six RAF pilots, see N.Gelb, *Scramble* (London, 1986), pp. 88-90.

112. See A.Price, *The Hardest Day* (London, 1979), p.23. Oblt. G.Schoepfel of JG 26 wrote, 'It was superior to the Hurricane and, above 6000 metres, faster than the Spitfire also ... our armament was the better, it was located more centrally, which made for more accurate shooting'.

of single-seater fighters over other types by taking heavy toll of the RAF's Defiants, especially on 19 July, when these machines were encountered in action near Folkestone and six were destroyed in a single battle.(113)

Several results surprised the Luftwaffe and counted to their disadvantage. The quality of Spitfires and Hurricanes, flown by spirited pilots, reinforced the opinions formed of these fighters during the battle in France. Far from reassuring was the proof gained over the Channel that the Me.110 and the Ju.87 were extremely vulnerable in combat and would be able to play a smaller part in the fighting over Britain than had been anticipated.(114)

Probably the greatest surprise for the Luftwaffe was the discovery that British aircraft were being controlled by a sophisticated system of communication, enabling fighters to be directed to targets. The RAF during this period were able to 'work some bugs out of their radar systems'(115) and learn about

113. Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, pp.326-27, gives six Defiants lost and one damaged. AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.62, apportions some blame to the Controller. In AIR 8/863, p.4553, paragraph 154, Dowding comments on the Defiant's weaknesses. His reservations were also shown before the war. See AIR 2/2964, 1938-39, Employment of two-seater and single-seater fighters in Home Defence, Dowding to Douglas (ACAS), 25 June 1938.

114. For Ju.87s in action, see AIR 50/22, No.56 Squadron Combat Reports, 13 July 1940. Also see Collier Collection, Document 56, 'Actions of VIII Fliegerkorps from 4 July 1940'. See also Galland, *First and Last*, pp.71-73. For weaknesses of the Me.110, see Townsend, *Duel of Eagles*, p.297 and AIR 50/32, No.74 Squadron Combat Reports, quoted in Robinson, pp.146-47.

115. Murray, p.50.

Luftwaffe tactics, showing that German strategy was at fault. However, fighting over the Channel was not unexpected, as the general plan of attack on Britain had not been formulated in July, yet the Luftwaffe had to show itself capable of action.

The surprising effect of British RDF on the Luftwaffe High Command was recollected by Galland, who flew Me.109s during the early sorties.(116) The unpreparedness demonstrates the weaknesses of the Luftwaffe Intelligence services, previously mentioned.(117) As late as 7 August, 'Beppo' Schmid expressed the view that Fighter Command aircraft were 'tied to their respective ground stations and are thereby restricted in mobility'.(118) Consequently he believed that a mass attack on a target by German bombers would meet only 'light fighter opposition' and that there would be 'considerable confusion in the defensive networks'.(119)

The slow start to preparations for a possible invasion, stemming particularly from Hitler's disinclination and lack of drive, made matters more difficult for the Luftwaffe, who were virtually the sole contributors to action from the German side.(120) Apart

116. See AHB Translation, vol.2, VII/121, pp.13-14. In comparison, the Luftwaffe was unable to track British fighters. They lacked systems of ground control and efficient radio communication between bombers and fighters.

117. See above, Chapter 2, notes 99 and 100.

118. Pamphlet No.248, p.80.

119. Ibid.

120. Liddell Hart, *German Generals Talk*, p.145, commented on the hesitancy of Hitler's Directive No.16 of 16 July. 'The order, however, sounded very "iffy"'. Boog, in Probert and Cox, p.18, gives the opening day of 'the battle for air superiority over England' as 13 August, showing further the pressure of time on the Luftwaffe's activities.

from other considerations, the number of days suitable for landings in Britain was limited, by such ungovernable factors as the weather and by the more predictable one of tides. As detailed plans for an offensive against the mainland were not laid before the end of the month, the possible dates for July were lost. The ideal form of invasion, by a combined operation of land, sea and air forces was limited to seven 'best days' in August, or fewer in September, by which time adverse conditions could be expected. Together with other difficulties facing German plans, this compression of opportunities for landings obviously affected the outlook of the Kriegsmarine and forced the Luftwaffe into a much narrower time-scale of operations than its commanders would have chosen.

Various branches of British Intelligence, which appear to have recovered fully from their failures in the Norwegian Campaign, issued sets of wary predictions of invasion throughout the summer and early autumn. Other reports brought more hope and are proof of the pressure of time placed particularly on the Luftwaffe. On 1 August, Churchill told the War Cabinet that Britain's position 'was now considerably more secure than in May'. On 9 August he said that Britain was winning the air battle. Three days later, a spy from within Germany Military Intelligence informed London that two or three weeks would elapse before invasion forces were ready.

The RAF's role, and particularly Fighter Command's part, must be viewed in relation to German capabilities. Only September was

available realistically for 'Sealion', a late and hazardous time. The Luftwaffe's main offensive then appeared as little more than a forlorn hope.(121)

To assess the effect of this period of German attacks, it is necessary to summarise the states of the two air forces in early August, before heavy raids moved to the mainland. The RAF had grown relatively stronger. On 10 July, Fighter Command had 52 squadrons ready for operations; by 8 August this total had grown to 55 squadrons, with six others under training. Three 'foreign' squadrons, two Polish and one Czech, had been formed during the month and these contained some very experienced pilots. Overall, the total of pilots available to Dowding had risen by 175 between 6 July and 3 August, in spite of the loss of 74, with 48 others wounded.(122)

The Luftwaffe, according to figures issued by the Quartermaster-General, had, on 3 August, 878 single-engined and 320 twin-engined fighters listed as 'serviceable'. However, Suchenwirth estimates that on 8 August the figures of these categories which were 'combat-ready' were 760 and 230 respectively.(123) German Air Force losses for July were given as 53 Me.109s and 22 Me.110s.(124)

121. Gilbert, vi, p.650, quotes a Churchill Memo of 1 July (CAB papers 120/144), seeking a list of dates offering the best conditions for invasion. There were only seven each for July and August. Also see Hinsley, i, Chapter 5; Gilbert, vi, p.710, quoting CAB 66/10, War Cabinet No.271 of 1940, 1 August 1940; Colville Diaries, 9 August 1940.

122. AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.81.

123. Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, pp.65-65.

124. See AHB Translation, vol.2, VII/83. However, Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, p.707, gives the combined losses of Me.109s and Me.110s for the period 10-31 July inclusive as 56 aircraft.

Additionally, British economic power, a factor on which a number of Service leaders and politicians had pinned their faith even before the war, was beginning to show in figures of aircraft production.(125) Fighter deliveries to the RAF in June, July and August were significantly greater than those of the Luftwaffe. In Postan's view they were 'more than enough to cover the losses'. The planned British figures for those three months, 292, 329 and 282, became, in reality, 446, 496 and 476 respectively.(126) In comparison, the German aircraft industry produced only 274 Me.109s and Me.110s in August.(127) Blame for this situation, later awarded to Udet and Jesschonnek, can also be laid at Hitler's door. He was already planning the campaign against Russia and placed air armament fifth in line for allocation of raw materials.(128)

* * *

At the start of the second phase of the air assault, Goering was attempting to overcome Fighter Command squadrons in the south of England. Having achieved that, he hoped to extend the offensive northwards until the Luftwaffe controlled all skies over Britain. In grand fashion he intended to open, and virtually close, the campaign with a huge attack, *Adlertag*, which would demolish resistance in a few days. This phase actually lasted from the start of August until the 18th of the month.

125. For example, see Taylor, *English History*, pp.460-61. 'Ministers shared the general delusion that economically Germany was at the end of her tether'.

126. Postan, p.116 and p.484.

127. Suchenwirth, *Turning Points*, p.66.

128. Suchenwirth, *Command and Leadership*, p.87.

The period made extensive demands on both the Luftwaffe and Fighter Command and by its end, the strategy, tactics and leadership of both air forces were being closely and critically examined. Therefore, an assessment is needed of these factors; evidence shows that by mid-August, although No.11 Group particularly was coming under greater pressure, the German Air Force had gone far to denying themselves victory.

On the German side there was more than a little frustration over this stage, which had opened with a strong air of confidence among Luftwaffe leaders and pilots.(129) Goering held a conference at the Hague on 1 August and plans were formulated for attacks on the south and west of England, moving gradually closer to London, with the intention of forcing Fighter Command into a battle of attrition.(130)

However, a combination of slow preparation, poor reconnaissance and unfavourable weather led to insignificant major action before 8 August. In retrospect, such delays really made small difference in the long run to part of a general battle for which little strategic thought had been applied. Even before the main

129. See T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p.133, which speaks of Goering and his staff as 'highly optimistic'. He quotes a German officer's comment from Halder's diary for 29 July 1940. 'Our Air Force on the whole feels that they have the edge on the British in equipment, leadership, skill, and with respect to the geographic factors'.

130. For a revealing account of Goering's methods in staff conferences, see *ibid*, pp.130-32, quoting the recollections of Theo Osterkamp, commander of JG 51. See also *Kesselring Memoirs*, pp.67-68.

'Eagle' attacks opened, the German lack of a direct and concentrated aim was of enormous assistance to Dowding and, more particularly to Park, who carried the immediate responsibility for defending London and the south.

Strategy demanded undivided purpose and there were three basic possibilities. First, Britain could be forced to surrender by the effects of blockade; second, victory could come from the power of air attack alone; third, the Luftwaffe could create conditions under which a seaborne invasion would be successfully launched. The weakness with Goering and the planning staff of the Luftwaffe at this time was the dissipation of effort among all three.(131)

Basic faults in strategy led to tactical errors. Heavy attacks were launched on August 8, 12, 13 and 15 and Fighter Command, especially No.11 Group, was greatly stretched.(132) However, no sustained and concentrated raids were launched on the Chain Home Link (CHL) radar stations, without which the Dowding system could barely operate. Temporary damage was done, but, once again, German Intelligence failed to recognise the importance of RDF to Fighter Command. Proof of this ignorance was displayed

131. Dr.H.Boog, in Probert and Cox, pp.22-23 and p.26, asserted that the German campaign was destined to fail through the short range of Me.109s which would 'determine the range of penetration of the bombers in daylight, leaving many of the fighter airfields and industrial installations farther inland out of reach'. Insufficient targets were hit 'whose destruction would help to paralyse the fighter defence system'.

132. See AIR 2/7281, Enclosure 5B, H.Q., No.11 Group to H.Q., Fighter Command, 12 September 1940. See also P.Wykeham, *Fighter Command* (London, 1960), pp.117-22. AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.82, calls 8 August 'the day popularly regarded as the beginning of the Battle of Britain', largely because, p.92, that was 'the last day on which the Luftwaffe expended any great effort on attacking convoys'.

at Goering's Karinhall conference on the 15th, when the Reichsmarschall. announced that there was little point in maintaining attacks on RDF sites 'in view of the fact that not one of those attacked has so far been put out of action.(133)

In this period, a serious scattering of effort resulted from several Luftwaffe attacks being made on airfields not vital to Fighter Command's defensive system. Eastchurch and Detling, both raided on the 13th, were Coastal Command aerodromes. Great damage was done elsewhere, but the importance of Sector stations to No.11 Group went unrecognised and no prolonged bombing of these took place.(134)

In a small, yet significant way, the comparative weakness of Luftwaffe communications was shown on the 15th. Dornier 17s from KG 2, escorted by Me.110s, were already in flight when their operation was postponed. Only the escorts received the radio message and had no means of communication with the bombers, which carried on in ignorance of the new order.(135)

133. Quoted in Irving, *Rise and Fall*, p.100, from Milch diary for 15 August 1940. See also Wood and Dempster, p.285. See also Collier Collection Document No.25, 'Goering Conferences with chiefs of Flotte 2 and 3, 1st, 3rd, 15th and 19th August 1940', for Goering's growing worries, at the same conference, of insufficient fighter protection for bombers.

134. Hough and Richards, pp.157 and 160-62.

135. See R.Collier, *Eagle Day* (London, 1980), pp.50-51, for the effects of poor communications that day. The confusion is also described in Bekker, pp.194-95. A German fighter pilot wrote, 'There was no link between the bombers and the fighters. It wasn't just a question of frequency; the bombers used morse and we used a voice operated system of RT - Radio Telephony'. U.Steinhilper and P.Osborne, *Spitfire on my Tail* (Bromley, 1989), p.264.

The failure of wide-ranging attacks on the 15th, involving all three Luftflotten, has been well documented.(136) This has been quoted as an example of Dowding's wisdom in maintaining squadrons in the north to meet any German assault on that region and as a defeat for the German Air Force.(137) On the other hand, the Germans gained one benefit. Appreciating that there was little future in using Luftflotte V attacks across the North Sea, many of its aircraft were later moved south to reinforce the main area of combat. Fighter Command's strategic policy, nonetheless, was not changed. Partly from Intelligence fears that the Germans were holding back planes for further raids in the north, Dowding maintained about one half of his fighter strength outside the Nos.10 and 11 Group areas, a major factor in the developing controversy over tactics.(138)

Further heavy onslaughts on the following day added to Fighter Command's burden. This was felt at all levels, from commanders, pilots and groundcrew, who worked virtually without respite

136. See, for example, Richards and Saunders, i, pp.172-74 and Terraine, pp.186-87.

137. See Churchill, ii, pp.285-86.

138. Fighter Command's Order of Battle for 8 August 1940 shows Dowding's cautious dispersal of forces. His opponents believed it to be an over-insurance. Of his best fighters, i.e., Hurricanes and Spitfires, 26 squadrons were in Nos.10 and 11 Groups; 21 squadrons were in Nos.12 and 13 Groups. Nine out of his nineteen squadrons of Spitfires were stationed outside what obviously was, and would continue to be, the main battle zone. Of all squadrons under his command, 29 were in that zone and 26 outside it. See AIR 16/365, Orders of Battle and operational strength of Squadrons, June 1940-April 1942, 8 August 1940. On 18 August, when the German campaign in the south was building in intensity, there were 27 Spitfire and Hurricane squadrons in that area and 24 squadrons to the north. See Price, *Hardest Day*, Appendix C.

to maintain the defence. Assaults were made particularly on airfields to draw RAF fighters into battle and in this, bombers were used as bait. Such an offensive, naturally, also taxed the Luftwaffe. For example, on the 13th, 1,485 sorties were flown, while the total reached 1,786 on the 15th.(139)

The climax of this period of battle was reached on Sunday 18 August, when, with an optimistic determination, aircraft from Luftflotten II and III were sent over for what was hoped to be a final, crushing blow to Fighter Command. The result was a day on which the combined casualties of both sides in numbers of aircraft destroyed exceeded those of any day in the Battle of Britain. Luftwaffe pilots discovered that the RAF was still able to put up Hurricane and Spitfire squadrons to counter almost every move.(140)

A prime reason was that, at the time, Goering and his commanders were suffering their heaviest casualty in the form of bad Intelligence. On the 17th, Schmid's survey of British losses over the previous fortnight was a flight of fancy, set out mainly

139. T.Taylor, *Breaking Wave*, p.137 and p.140.

140. See Price, *Hardest Day*, Appendices E and F. After a ten-year research, he believes that on the 18th, 69 Luftwaffe aircraft were destroyed or damaged beyond repair, at a cost of 65 to the RAF. Of the latter figure, 32 were Hurricanes and seven Spitfires. It is important to note the loss, usually 'hidden' in totals, of 25 British aircraft on the ground. Considering that the result of the battle hinged on the effort and performance of single-engined fighters, it should be noted that the Germans lost only eighteen Me.109s on the day. Nonetheless, to show variations in claims, even after detailed research, Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, pp.581-90, lists 67 Luftwaffe aircraft written off, sixteen of them Me.109s; he offers the figure of 28 Hurricanes and five Spitfires as RAF losses.

in the form of a subtraction sum. The figure of 900 RAF fighters with squadrons was given for 1 July. Of these, 574 were claimed to have been shot down in the period, with 196 lost from other causes. Taking replacements as numbering 300, this gave an overall loss of 470. Of the remaining 430 fighters, 70% were reckoned to be serviceable, i.e., 300 first-line machines. Schmid estimated that 200 of these were in the south, 70 in 'Central England' and 30 in the north and Scotland.

The Luftwaffe Intelligence Service's damage to the cause may also be noted from figures issued at the same time for aircraft losses on 8 August. The loss of fourteen German aircraft, five of them Me.109s, was admitted; in reply, 42 Spitfires and Hurricanes were claimed to have been shot down 'over the Channel'.(141)

* * *

On the British side, Nos. 10 and 11 Groups, especially the latter, bore the heaviest burden.(142) The Dowding System worked satisfactorily, although RDF did not always give accurate information. Allen recollected Dowding's predicament here, because 'massed formations would jam his radars through sheer numbers of airborne aircraft flying on converging courses'.(143)

141. See AHB Translation, vol.9, No.VII/123, 'Situation Reports issued by Luftwaffe Führungsstab 1C', 1-15 August 1940. According to Price, *Hardest Day*, Appendix C, on 18 August Fighter Command possessed 928 serviceable fighters, of which 802 were Hurricanes or Spitfires. According to Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, pp.556-57, the RAF lost nineteen aircraft; German losses are given as 24 aircraft, nine of them Me.109s.

142. Allen, *Who Won?*, p.149, shows the extent of the burden.

143. *Ibid*, p.117.

On cloudy days, the Observer Corps had obvious difficulty in tracking formations moving inland. Yet Park, following his C-in-C's policy, had to rely implicitly on information fed to his headquarters. His greatest fear, he later told a fighter pilot, was that his Sector stations would be attacked; he showed his faith in communications by adding, 'Without signals the only thing I commanded was my desk at Uxbridge'.(144)

In writing his report on this stage of the battle, Park later noted that German fighters often flew much higher than their bombers. This tactic gave them height advantage in interception, but was not guaranteed always to offer the best protection to their charges. He restated the policy on which he and Dowding had pinned their faith, 'to engage the enemy before he reached his coastal objective'.(145)

Fighter Command's greatest problem was proving to be shortage of pilots. 'I was worried daily from July to September', Park recalled, 'by a chronic shortage of trained fighter pilots'. There was one clear advantage for the RAF over the Luftwaffe in that German aircrew parachuting down over England were lost to further action, whereas British pilots might live to fight

144. Orange, p.101.

145. Park's Report is in AIR 2/7355, Report on Air Fighting by No. 11 Group, 8 August-10 September 1940, 12 September 1940. See also Orange, p.102.

another day. Nonetheless, wounds and injuries often precluded Fighter Command airmen from returning straight to battle.(146)

By the end of August, the air defences in the south and the south-east were holding, but at considerable cost. Not the least cause of the strain exerted on No.11 Group was Dowding's policy of reinforcement, worked out from pre-war days and carried through loyally by Park, on whom the main burden was resting. The Commander-in-Chief referred to this policy in his report on the battle,(147) but during early August, even before the concentrated offensive against Fighter Command's aerodromes began, weaknesses showed. Some squadrons fought themselves to exhaustion from persistent combat and heavy losses and thus, for a period of time before being withdrawn to a quieter sector, were far from efficient. This factor, combined with odds which seemed

146. C.Shores, *Duel for the Sky* (London, 1985), p.54, shows the burden caused by pilot casualties. The figure for the Command's pilots killed, missing or prisoner rose from 74 in July to 148 in August. Figures for those wounded or injured in those months were 49 and 156 respectively. An interesting contrary view is taken by Air Marshal Sir Kenneth Porter, who said that 'shortage of pilots was not really considered'; Porter interview, 19 August 1991. However, the events that led to Dowding's meeting with Park on 7 September make this assertion difficult to accept.

Of many examples of lack of pilot training, a typical case was that of a young pilot of No.601 Squadron. 'I flew only an hour on Spitfires before I got to the Battle of Britain. On Hurricanes I had only ten hours altogether. I never flew a Hurricane at night. I never fired its guns'. Interview, Squadron-Leader B.Ogilvie, Tunbridge Wells, 11 November 1989.

147. AIR 8/863, p.4554, paragraphs 169-72.

to confront them in almost every action, caused No.11 Group in particular to enter the next phase of battle at a considerable disadvantage. (148)

* * *

148. See AIR 41/15, ADGB, ii, p.219. Allen, *Who Won?* p.149, remarks on this inflexibility of strategy. 'It was noticeable, during the activity of 18 August when Goering's wrath was incurred, that not one aircraft from 12- or 13- Groups received battle damage and only two from 10-Group were hit'.

PART FIVE: GROWING POLITICAL INTEREST

Almost every account of the Battle of Britain fails to explore the continuing saga of Dowding's appointment and the response of politicians to him during August. An examination of his leadership, however, is incomplete without this and can be opened with a summary of the Prime Minister's attitude.

The extreme bravery of the pilots of Fighter Command and the conduct of the battle by their leader gained Churchill's approval during the month. Realising that, in spite of Britain's growing power of defence, much depended on the actions being fought by the RAF, the Prime Minister kept in close touch with the events of combat. On 3 August he visited Headquarters, Fighter Command during the afternoon and that evening entertained Dowding with several others, including Lindemann, to dinner at Chequers. Four days later, Lindemann asked Churchill to approve of experiments which Dowding wanted, relating to RDF with night defence.(149) The Prime Minister was thereby well aware of the work being carried out by the Commander-in-Chief and of his role within the RAF.

Churchill's approval of Dowding at that stage is shown by a letter which he sent to Sinclair on the 10th. The tone displays definite displeasure with the Secretary of State, yet great sympathy with the leader of Fighter Command. 'I certainly understood from our conversation a month ago that you were going to give Dowding an indefinite war-time extension', he began,

149. Gilbert, vi, p.711.

adding peremptorily, 'and were going to do it at once'. He could not understand how any contrary impression had been gained 'about my wishes'. Churchill then urged Sinclair to take 'the step I have so long desired', adding how wrong it was to keep the Commander-in-Chief in uncertainty over his appointment. That was not fair, 'least of all to the nation'. Churchill added strongly that he could not approve and finished by asking that 'you will be able to set my mind at rest'.(150)

There is only one piece of direct evidence of what prompted the Prime Minister to send the letter and thus resurrect the question of Dowding's future. Undoubtedly the Commander-in-Chief's handling of the battle had been under review for a number of days. Possibly the matter had arisen in conversation with Dowding himself, or even with Lindemann, who was deeply interested in night defence and whose judgement and opinions Churchill trusted.

But the Prime Minister had evidently discussed Dowding with Sinclair on the day before writing the letter, because in his reply, dated 12 August, the Secretary of State noted that 'after our talk on Friday I spoke at once to the C.A.S.'. The letter was noticeably apologetic in tone compared with Churchill's sharpness. 'I cannot tell you how sorry I am that there should have been any misunderstanding', he said, claiming not to have ignored deliberately the Prime Minister's wishes, which 'is

150. AIR 19/572, Enclosure 10A, Churchill to Sinclair, 10 August 1940. The only addition to the letter was a note in red crayon, 'Message to Sqds - A.H.M.S.', written in Sinclair's hand.

the last thing I should want to do'. He added that Newall had now written to the Commander-in-Chief, withdrawing the earlier time limit of October and this would leave him in 'exactly the same position as the other Commanders-in-Chief'.(151)

On 12 August Newall wrote to Dowding, telling him of the new conclusion and commenting that in current circumstances he realised the disadvantages involved of the decision taken in July. 'I sincerely hope', he concluded, 'that this information will be agreeable to you'.(152)

Dowding replied formally, thanking the CAS for the letter, 'the contents of which I have noted with pleasure'.(153) The brevity of his response is understandable, having been written on the 13th, the day on which the Luftwaffe flew 1,485 sorties over Britain. He received official notification of the cancellation 'of the time limit to the period of your appointment' from the Air Ministry eight days later.(154)

On 15 August, a day of enormous activity, Churchill showed further evidence of interest in the air war. Eden recalled how he and the Prime Minister sat in the Cabinet Room as reports of operations came in.(155) Then Churchill went to Headquarters,

151. Ibid, Enclosure 12A, Sinclair to Churchill, 12 August 1940.

152. Ibid, Newall to Dowding, 12 August 1940.

153. Dowding Papers, HCTD S.305, Dowding to Newall, 13 August 1940.

154. Ibid, Air Ministry to Dowding, 21 August 1940.

155. *Eden Memoirs: The Reckoning*, p.137.

Fighter Command and watched the defensive effort. Colville noted that, on his return, the Prime Minister was 'consumed with excitement' and claimed, after sending news to Chamberlain, 'it is one of the greatest days in history'.(156)

One reason for this was the factor, common to both sides, of exaggerated claims of success. Churchill believed that over one hundred German aircraft had been destroyed.(157)

On the following day, Churchill, showing an example of leadership significantly lacking on the other side of the Channel, visited the headquarters of No.11 Group at Uxbridge and saw the Operations Room in action. During the evening he told Ismay, 'Don't speak to me; I have never been so moved', before going on to utter the quotation beginning, 'Never in the field of human conflict ...', which became famous when repeated in his parliamentary speech five days later.(158)

156. *Colville Diaries*, 15 August 1940. Five days earlier, Churchill had stated, in a telegram to the Prime Ministers of Australia and New Zealand, 'I do not think the German Air Force has the numbers or quality to overpower our defences'. See Gilbert, vi, p.726, quoting PREM 4/43B/1, folios 219-25, 10 August 1940.

157. *Ibid.* The actual total was 76 German aircraft. See Ramsey, *Battle of Britain*, pp.571-75. The exaggerated claims had a good effect on civilian morale, especially for those in 'Occupied Britain'. An Englishwoman on Sark shared the Prime Minister's enthusiasm for RAF success. Her diary for 15 August noted, 'A grand day for Britain - one hundred and sixty planes brought down'. She added that the 'sky has been black' with German planes. Julia Tremayne, *War on Sark* (Exeter, 1981), p.28.

158. *Ismay Memoirs*, pp.179-80.

Yet Churchill showed greater realism over air losses on the 16th, when he minuted Newall, reminding him of Bomber Command's losses. Referring to bombers destroyed on the ground the previous day, he made a point to which few accounts of the battle allude - namely that these losses altered the balance of success between the two air forces considerably. (159)

Churchill's praise for the pilots of Fighter Command was clear from his speech to Parliament on 20 August. It is, nonetheless, generally unnoticed that his words that day included great praise for Bomber Command. As well as mentioning fighter pilots 'whose brilliant actions we see with our own eyes', he showed a judgement of what would happen to the enemy. Hitler, he predicted, would have no gain if 'the entire economic and scientific apparatus of German war power lay shattered and pulverized at home'. Churchill's clarity of purpose in seeking to hit back aggressively was never far absent at that time and marks an important difference of outlook between him and Dowding. (160)

Three days later, W.P. Crozier, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, interviewed the Prime Minister. His report summarised the guarded optimism being felt, even at the height of battle. Churchill said that between 8 and 18 August, Britain had done

159. Prime Minister's Personal Minute, M.18, 17 August 1940, quoted in Gilbert, vi, pp.736-37.

160. 364 H.C. Deb 5s, c.1167, 20 August 1940.

well in the air battle. 'But I don't think it's over. Some people do'. He added that a German invasion could not be attempted without air superiority - 'that he must have' - and that over England, apart from the sea, the bodies of 150 German airmen had been recovered in the period.(161)

To assess the sentiments of Sinclair towards the leadership of Fighter Command is not easy, because his personal papers from this stage were destroyed.(162) Nevertheless, certain deductions may be drawn from the recollections of those who knew him. First, as may be seen from his letter of 12 August,(163) he disliked offending Churchill, who, according to Colville, 'treated him at times with a half serious levity'.(164) The low esteem in which the Australian, Bruce, held him was shared by others.(165) 'Chips' Channon disliked his style in Parliament.(166) Beaverbrook believed that his opinions could

161. *Crozier Interviews*, interview with Churchill, 23 August 1940.

162. The Thurso Papers are at Churchill College, Cambridge and consist of 197 boxes. According to the Archivist, many of his wartime papers were destroyed by two fires. The first was at the Liberal Club during the Blitz; the second, accidental, blaze occurred at his Scottish home. Visit to Churchill College, 1 April 1989. For Sinclair, Dowding was an inherited problem.

163. See above, note 151.

164. J.Colville, in *Action This Day: Working with Churchill*, edited by Sir John Wheeler-Bennett (London, 1968), p.195.

165. See Chapter 1, note 5.

166. *Channon Diaries*, p.264. Channon wrote of Sinclair's speech on 20 August which 'made the almost incredibly magnificent exploits of our airmen sound dull and trite: his stammer, and his trick of re-iterated over-emphasis are very monotonous'.

be easily swayed because, after making a decision, 'he'll go away and talk to one of his Air Marshals and then you'll find he isn't prepared to defend his view any longer - his Air Marshal has changed his opinion for him!'.(167)

There is an overall impression that Sinclair was in the hands of the Air Staff. Nonetheless, some thought better of his contribution. Douglas, perhaps unsurprisingly, referred to his 'vigour and great ability and success'.(168) Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, who served then at the Air Ministry, remembered his 'perfect manners, integrity and personal charm'.(169)

His passage within the Government at this time was made less easy because of Churchill's reservations over the abilities of the Air Ministry and also through the continuing struggle for power between that ministry and Beaverbrook's Ministry of Aircraft Production. Beaverbrook appeared to carry more weight with the Prime Minister and his pungent style led to controversy with Sinclair on several occasions.(170)

167. Crozier Interviews, p.198, interview with Beaverbrook, 12 noon, 24 August 1940.

168. Douglas, *Years of Command*, p.278.

169. Air Marshal Sir Robert Saundby, *The Ampleforth Journal* (1970), p.84. Saundby added, 'Indeed, we called him "The Hidalgo", because of what we regarded as his "courtly Spanish grace"'. Air Marshal Sir Denis Crowley-Milling remembered Sinclair speaking 'as if he had twelve plums in his mouth'. Crowley-Milling interview, 14 December 1989. For the opinion of a Canadian politician, see *A Party Politician, The Memoirs of Chubby Power*, edited by N.Ward (Toronto, 1966), pp.196-97. Power claimed that Sinclair 'always seemed to be addressing me in speeches such as he would make to the House of Commons, and we never reached a basis of mutual understanding'.

170. See above, for example, note 13.

Beaverbrook was the third politician closely involved with Dowding and Fighter Command and his opinions and interventions were of great importance. He was, in relation to Churchill, according to Colville, 'the last of his old cronies, and he exerted an infallible fascination on him'.(171) Yet while serving the Prime Minister loyally, Beaverbrook had reservations about his methods, telling Bruce on 2 July, 'Winston thinks he is a modern Marlborough'.(172)

Partly because he saw him as a fellow sufferer from the machinations of the Air Ministry and partly through his respect for the Commander-in-Chief's work in Fighter Command, Beaverbrook held Dowding in high regard. He could agree with Pile's assessment, written on 19 August, that now, 'thanks to Sir Hugh Dowding, an invasion of this country is not practical'.(173)

Beaverbrook's appreciation of the Commander-in-Chief was transmitted to Churchill, influencing his opinion of leadership within the RAF. The Minister of Aircraft Production's enthusiasm for Dowding was strongly displayed during an interview with the ubiquitous and inquisitive Crozier. He spoke of him as 'the man whom I regard as coming to the front in everything that relates

171. Colville, in *Action This Day*, pp.105-06.

172. C.Edwards, *Bruce of Melbourne, Man of Two Worlds* (London, 1965), p.303.

173. Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/430, Pile to Beaverbrook, 19 August 1940.

to the war', adding, 'He's a great fellow!' Some Air Staff leaders would have rejected his next assertion. 'There's no idea that he won't try'. Before the end of the interview, Beaverbrook pressed Crozier to meet Dowding, which he thought would be very worthwhile. (174)

And yet, ironically, although the Canadian was the Commander-in-Chief's champion, Beaverbrook's dislike of Newall led to a disclosure of some of the Air Ministry's reservations regarding Dowding. This emanated from a document of undeclared origin that was circulated among several members of the Conservative Party. Entitled, 'A Weak Link in the Nation's Defences', the five page typed document was a swingeing attack on the Chief of the Air Staff. Unfortunately for Dowding, one section of the paper was very critical of him, calling Fighter Command 'a one man show'. He had 'inadequate mental ability and a very slow brain'. Dowding was a 'complete non-co-operator with authority' and treated his staff deplorably.

A copy of the paper was sent by the Conservative Member of Parliament, Irene Ward, to Churchill, who saw it on 21 August. In turn, he passed it to Sinclair with the comment, 'Archie, let me have this back. W.S.C.'. Its importance was that it helped to carry the Air Ministry's case for Dowding to be removed closer to politicians, a side effect never intended by Beaverbrook. Possibly, the author was Wing-Commander E.J. Kingston-McCloughry, an Australian who worked at the Air Ministry and, for reasons of his own, wished to see Newall removed.

174. Crozier Interviews, p.199, interview with Beaverbrook, 12 noon, 29 August 1940.

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More background to the paper is given by Denis Richards, Portal's biographer. He shows the pressure brought by Irene Ward, a Conservative back-bencher, on the leadership of the RAF. Having been approached by some RAF officers who had no confidence in Newall, believed that Dowding's appointment as CAS to succeed him would be a disaster, and who wanted Portal to have the position, she espoused their cause with determination. Not only did she send a copy of the document to the Prime Minister, but also passed one to Churchill's confidant, Brendan Bracken. Sinclair met her in September and, after Portal had gained the promotion in October, wrote to Bracken. He referred to her as 'your virago' who probably believed that her intervention had ensured the appointment and that 'not for the first time, a goose had saved the Capitol'. Certainly the episode proves the power held by politicians in affecting Service appointments, a manifestation that was to recur for Dowding.

Another politician who saw weaknesses in Newall was Hugh Dalton, at the Ministry of Economic Warfare. In discussions with him, one RAF officer regretted 'that the Air Force had not enough "power over the port". Old admirals and generals, he said, hobnobbed off-stage with Cabinet Ministers who had been at school with them, and fixed things up. But the Chief of the Air Staff was not at school with anyone who mattered'. Dalton, an Old Etonian, offered to help.(175)

175. Copies of 'A Weak Link in the Nation's Defences' are in PREM 4/3/6 and Beaverbrook Papers, BBK D/328. The former file has various letters and papers concerning Irene Ward's intervention, including a note from Bracken to Churchill calling her 'a rather ferocious female'. See also D.Richards, *Portal of Hungerford* (London, 1977), pp.168-69 and H.Dalton, *The Fateful Years, Memoirs, 1931-1945* (London, 1957), pp.344-45.

From the variety of opinions offered by politicians about the RAF at that time, together with their mutual relationships, it may be deduced that Dowding's efforts in August were well received. Nonetheless, the undercurrent of dislike emanating from the Air Ministry was starting to gain a wider audience. This happened at the stage, late in the month, when changes in Luftwaffe strategy and tactics led to the most difficult days in the history of Fighter Command - and brought Dowding's pilots in No.11 Group close to being overwhelmed.

